

Populism And Democratic Decay: A Dialectic Analysis Of Trump's Populism

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the brand of populism associated with Trump and its impact on the functioning of American democracy. Addressing the knowledge gap between right-wing populist appeal and its consequences on democratic institutional, the paper draws on Hegel's dialectical method to examine whether or not Trump's populism constitutes a genuine threat to American democracy. The central argument posits that while U.S. democratic institutions have shown resilience, Trump's exclusionary and emotional populist discourse has eroded democratic culture and deepened social polarization. The study analyzes Trump's political persona through a qualitative lens, relying on secondary sources such as reports, speeches, and public opinion data. The findings reveal that although Trump has not structurally dismantled U.S. democratic institutions, his populist narrative has contributed to democratic backsliding by undermining civil liberties, promoting intolerance, and weakening public trust in institutional legitimacy. The conclusion synthesizes both perspectives—those that emphasize institutional strength and those that highlight democratic cultural degradation—to argue that Trump's populism represents a degenerative force in American democracy. With Trump's return to the White House following the 2024 reelection, the urgency of understanding his exclusionary populism has intensified.

Key Words: Populism, Democratic Norms, Political Polarization, Culture politics, America First.

Introduction

Populist movements characterized by anti-establishment and rejection of traditional politics have gained traction in recent years. Especially, the upsurge of right-wing populism in the fringes of Europe, Asia, and America has made it a buzzword of the 21st century. In the US, Donald Trump's political rise marks a paradigmatic case of exclusionary populism, one that resonates deeply with the anxieties of the white working class and draws heavily on cultural nostalgia and anti-immigrant sentiment. Promising to bring American glory back, Trump cantered his agenda around the slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA). He framed immigrants as threats, pledged to bring back manufacturing jobs, and

vowed to close borders to alleged Mexican criminals. To advance this vision, Trump employed a populist strategy marked by emotional appeals, anti-establishment rhetoric, and a strong anti-immigration narrative—captivating millions who came to view him as the nation's savior.

This paper seeks to explore the populist persona of Donald Trump and assess the extent to which his style of governance has posed a threat to American democracy. Using Hegel's dialectical method, the research develops a three-part framework: the **thesis** contends that Trump's populism has undermined democratic culture; the **antithesis** argues that institutional resilience has protected democracy from serious harm; and

the **synthesis** reconciles these claims by evaluating how Trumpism has eroded democratic norms without toppling democratic structures.

In this context, the paper seeks to address several key questions: How can Donald Trump's populist persona be decoded? What defines his unique brand of populism? And to what extent has this political style contributed to the degeneration of democracy in the United States? By analyzing Trump's rhetoric and political strategies through a political-theoretical lens, the study aims to unpack the exclusionary nature of his populism and examine its broader implications for both democratic institutions and the social fabric of American society.

This paper employs Hegelian dialectics to navigate the polarized academic debate on populism's impact on democracy. It contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced synthesis of institutional and cultural dimensions of democratic decay. Unlike most studies that focus solely on democratic collapse or resilience, this paper argues for a third path—one where populism corrodes the democratic fabric without completely dismantling it.

Literature Review

Müller (2018), in his book *What is Populism?* Critically examines the rise and impact of populism in contemporary politics, arguing that we live in a post-populist era, with Brexit and the election of President Trump. His *Populism* revolves around the populist's claim to represent the "real people" against corrupt elites. This core narrative makes populism anti-establishment, anti-elitist, and anti-pluralism, leading to the exclusion of those who do not fit into the category of real people. Populism is a threat to democratic culture, even when the people are not in power. Populists delegitimize political opponents and institutions, alleging backdoor influence and electoral fraud. Their constant criticism of the system and establishment can be constructive for democratic growth, but it also undermines public confidence in democratic institutions.

Moffit (2017) in his book, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, locates the phenomenon of populism in contemporary politics across the regions. He explores both the binaries of right-

wing and left-wing populism with examples from across the world to illustrate the political strategy of populists. He draws some conclusions to unveil the role of media in shaping the populist discourse and rhetoric, specifically, how in Europe and America, populists have employed popular political strategies through media to garner attention through well-crafted emotional appeals and rhetorics. His central argument deals with the unraveling of populism as a political performance rather than as a set of ideological beliefs. Populist utilizes diverse communication channels, and charismatic personalistic and social media spaces to whip up the popular sentiments among the public. In short, it explores how the principles of populism are shaping up accordingly and changing political discourse and dynamics as the global environment is changing due to technological advancements and social media.

Masaru (2021), in his article, "Presidency of Donald Trump and American Democracy" reviews scholarly literature on Trump's presidency and the decline of democracy in the U.S. He highlights growing impatience and intolerance in American society, noting that democratic decline has been evident since 2016, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Using quantitative studies and indices like the 'Liberal Democracy Index' and 'Electoral Democracy Index,' Masaru shows a steady decline in democratic scores. He examines whether the U.S. is moving toward authoritarianism, citing scholars like Levitsky, Ziblatt, and Yashna Monk, who argue that democratic norms have weakened. However, he also acknowledges scholars who remain optimistic about the country's institutional safeguards, concluding that while democratic decline is evident, it is too early to determine if authoritarianism will emerge.

Mounk (2019), in his book *The People vs. Democracy*, examines the rise of illiberal democracies, noting the growing nationalist wave in Europe, South Asia, and North America. He argues that populism poses a significant threat to democratic values, as populists target institutions, suppress free speech, muzzle opposition, and erode media independence. The election of Trump marked a troubling turn, mirroring populist trends

in Europe. Mounk highlights the increasing intolerance, elite capture, and fears of migration and economic insecurity, which fuel support for authoritarian leaders. The decline in trust in institutions and democratic norms poses a serious threat to liberal democracy.

Runciman (2018), in his book, "How Democracy Ends?" explores the risks of democratic collapse under Donald Trump, arguing that democracy has reached a "middle age" crisis, particularly in America, where small issues are exacerbated. The rise of populism, technological disruptions, leadership crises, and public disillusionment have accelerated democratic backsliding. Trump's election marked a challenge to democratic norms, especially the peaceful transfer of power. Despite these threats, Runciman believes in America's resilience, citing the past survival of populist and extremist movements. He stresses the need for civic engagement, institutional reform, and political leadership committed to democratic values to strengthen democracy.

Weyland (2020), the author argues that while populism is a global threat to democracy, the success of populists depends on resilient institutions and socioeconomic or political crises. Comparing American democracy to other nations, Weyland concludes that the U.S. is less vulnerable to populist takeover due to its strong institutional checks, rigid constitution, and vigilant civil society. He contrasts the U.S. with countries like Hungary, Venezuela, and Turkey, where weak institutions allowed leaders like Orban, Chavez, and Erdogan to amend constitutions and consolidate power. Although Trump exhibited authoritarian tendencies, Weyland argues that America's institutional resilience, economic strength, and civil society make it unlikely for populists to permanently undermine U.S. democracy.

Levitsky & Ziblatt (2019), in their book "How Democracies Die?" explores how democratic backsliding is often driven by leaders who undermine democracy to retain power. They argue that the erosion of democratic norms has been a global trend for over a decade, with Trump's presidency serving as a significant

turning point in the U.S. His populist appeal, defined by nativism, racism, and nationalism, further deepened societal polarization, exacerbating divisions between Republicans and Democrats. This polarization, along with attacks on institutions like the press and judiciary, has posed a serious threat to American democracy. While the U.S. has survived past threats to its democratic norms due to civil society's resilience, Levitsky and Ziblatt stress that the recent upsurge of populism is an unprecedented moment for the American democracy that could be conclusive moment for longstanding liberal democracy.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the degenerative impact of Donald Trump's populism on American democratic norms and institutions. Given the interpretive nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach is most appropriate for exploring the narratives, discourses, and symbolic strategies deployed by Trump as part of his populist persona.

The study is both exploratory and explanatory in nature. It is exploratory in the sense that it seeks to decode the rhetorical style and emotional appeals that define Trump's populism, and explanatory in its effort to link these elements to patterns of democratic backsliding. The analysis draws on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank reports, government documents, institutional performance indices (such as the Freedom House and V-Dem reports), news archives, campaign speeches, and official communications (e.g., social media posts, policy documents).

The study also employs analytical framework grounded in Hegelian dialectics, which is used to structure the investigation into three parts: the thesis (Trump as a threat to democracy), the antithesis (institutional resilience against populism), and the synthesis (a balanced assessment of

democratic degeneration). This framework provides both a logical structure and an interpretive lens for analysing the complex and contested impact of populist politics in a liberal democratic setting. Through this multi-sourced, theory-driven, and interpretive methodology, the study aims to offer a nuanced and academically grounded contribution to the ongoing debate about populism and democratic decline in the United States.

Decoding Populism as a Political Concept

Populism is the most debated concept in social sciences, and it is an arduous task to generalize it into a few words. Over the past two decades, extensive literature has been produced on populism, solidifying its status as a political concept or identity-based ideology. The earlier author to work on populism was Ernesto Laclau who termed populism as a political ideology that represents verbal expression of people's grievances perceived illegitimate by the establishment (Laclau, 2018).

Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira define populism as a “thin-centered” ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and opposing groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.”. Albertazzi and McDonnell, along with Jan-Werner Müller, describe it as a moralistic vision of politics, where political issues are viewed through a moral lens and corrupt individuals are deemed inferior. Margaret Canovan characterizes populism as a means of challenging established ideas and values, such as democracy, by amplifying people's demands. Kurt Weyland, the proponent of political-strategist, views populism as a political style and strategy in which a charismatic leader strives to hold direct government by fading the influence of institutions. A leader that seeks to rule “based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers (Mazzoleni, 2016).”

So, one can infer the following arguments from the above: first, called the ideational approach is given by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira, which defines populism in moralistic terms where the distinction is made based upon the pure people versus the corrupt elite. Cas Mudde further elaborated populism as a

thin-centered ideology that implies it cannot exist in isolation; rather, it seeks to attach with other ideologies such as nationalism, racism, nativism, and religion. Exclusionism depends upon the ideology with which populism attaches based on political circumstances. Second is the political-strategic approach formulated by Kurt Weyland, which defines populism as a political strategy deployed by populists to acquire, demonstrate, and retain power. The political-strategic approach focuses on the public using an anti-establishment narrative and slogan of change that positions the establishment as its primary opponent. From the above definitions, one can infer that populism is a kind of political strategy that is carried out by personalistic leadership against the corrupt establishment, elite, or any group of people that are considered obnoxious for the existing cultural values.

Populism involves methods and instruments that help a personalistic leadership win the power position within the existing system. They wield such strategies that sustain their support among the masses, employed equally by the left-wing as well as the right-wing politicians. However, the resurgence of far-right politics in the world and the US shifts the focus to right-wing populism. Donald Trump is an extraordinary example of the concurrent wave of right-wing populism in power whose political strategies are exclusionary and lined up against anti-cultural entities.

Locating the Populist Persona of Trump

In the researcher's view, Donald Trump embodies nearly all the defining characteristics of a populist leader, such as exhibiting charismatic leadership, whipping an anti-establishment narrative, and championing the interests of ordinary people against the elite. Trump is categorized as a right-wing populist due to his tendency for exclusionary ideology rooted in nativist and racist sentiments. He often appeals emotionally and presents himself as a political outsider who entered politics to save the nation. Before delving further into the details of his populism through four key arguments, it is important to establish who Donald Trump is and how his status as a political outsider shapes his populist identity. He was termed a populist as the year 2016 has been called “the year of the

populist” and Donald Trump “its apotheosis” (Lacatus, 2018).

Trump is the third president, after Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton, who has faced impeachment in US history. Like many other US presidents, Trump is a successful businessman and a billionaire. During his tenure in the white house, he also found himself surrounded by myriad controversies ranging from sexual assault to tax evasion. Till here, he seems to be a reflection of his predecessors. However, the things that distinguish him from others are that he is the only president who has been impeached twice; first in December 2019 for abuse of power and the second time for his attack on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2020. He is the second president, after Grover Cleveland, to be elected to non-consecutive terms in US history. He strategically painted himself as a political outsider who joined politics to protect the greater interest of the American people. His mastery over narrative-making and rhetoric-building landed him in the White House. Glancing at these details, Trump may appear as a person with a normal background who was set to lead the foundations of abnormal politics in US history.

Besides this, Trump's political strategy that imbues populist themes also makes him a rare entry in the presidential hose. His political strategy comprised four tenets: First, his success was not rooted in the Republican party manifesto; rather, it largely stemmed from divisive politics based on racist and xenophobic rhetoric. He inculcated these themes in his speeches to lure the white American working class. Trump Populism is an extension Jacksonian racial of populism, and Tea Party conservatism (Torre, 2018). His birth certificate controversy against President Obama was just an episode of his xenophobic absurdity. Second, his reliance on populist emotional appeal as his populist narrative was more concerned with the grievances of White Americans. He tapped the White American fear of job encroachment and portrayed immigrants as threatening their cultural values at the hands of immigrants (Skonieczny, 2018). Trump exploited economic anxieties that were prevalent in the white working class as a result of globalization and free trade. He resonated his agenda with the white population who considered the corporatist elite and establishment

responsible for their grievances. He became their mouthpiece against the forces of globalization and rapidly changing post-industrial society (Torri, 2018, P 744-45).

Third, the reason behind Trump's success was his political strategy which involves his charismatic persona and mastery of the language of rhetoric. Trump's speech includes emotionally charged, anti-establishment narratives, a common strategy used by all the populists. Trump used mastery of language and slogans to represent himself as a sympathizer and savior of the nation. Michael highlighted that Trump was using language and ways of communication that no other politician has used (Kickham, 2017). He transgressed intermediary forces and relied on direct communication channels such as Twitter to connect with the public to retain and sustain popular support among the masses. Lastly, Trump spoke of a quintessential populist theme: elite betrayal. He fervently used language to create divisions that how real Americans, comprised of the white working class, have long been ignored by the ruling or Washington elite. He promoted the idea that bigwigs had crafted policies whose ultimate aim was to benefit the elites. They have failed to improve the lives of true Americans, especially those living in the Rust Belt.

The whole narrative of Trump revolves around these populist themes. The most popular slogans that caught the attention of millions and helped Trump win hearts were: Ban Illegal Immigration, build a Mexican Wall, and Make America Great Again (MAGA). Especially, MAGA became the hallmark of Trump, as he said, “We will make America strong, proud, and safe, to make America great again (POLITICO, 2016). He showed people a path to the glorification of the past, which the populists use to give realization to people that the era in which they are living is not their true future. He presented migrants such as Mexicans and Muslims as Criminals and terrorists posing a threat to the longstanding American values. The narrative of anti-immigration aimed to deport such tendencies and build a great wall along the southern border to stop illegal border crossings as he cheered, “We will build a great wall along the southern border. And Mexico will pay for the wall (POLITICO, 2016).” These

slogans aided him in garnering a massive as he received 46.1 percent of the popular vote, of which around 60% was comprised of the white vote (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

Such rhetorical politics as devised by Trump stands at odds with traditional politics that relies on the former party's performance or ideology. On contrarily, Trump shaped his strategy in such a way that if the American nation is at the end of its end, and if he is not elected, the end is certain. Undoubtedly, his rhetoric captivated those who believed that American society was undergoing a profound transformation and that immigrants were exacerbating the nation's struggles. Resultantly, party politics became more divisive, polarization between supporters increased, and camp politics on the issue of immigration intensified in the issue. Throughout his tenure, Trump fueled lines between his supporters and opposition and pushed for an exclusionary agenda that included tailoring travel bans and building a Mexican wall to curb migrant movement inside the US borders. The heyday of democracy ended the day when Trump supporters refused to accept, the results of the 2020 election and carried out an assault on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021. This marked a watershed moment for the US's longstanding liberal democracy, which had, for over a century, never experienced an assault on its core institutions. His failure to secure re-election sparked debate among scholars about whether his political style posed a threat to democracy or whether it had ultimately ended with his inability to win re-election in 2020. Both these debates are discussed in detail in the next section.

Dialectic Method to Study Degenerative Impact of Trump Populism on the US Democracy

Logical coherence is imperative for uncovering the truth which is often fragmented and subjective. Hegel's dialectic method provides a route to navigate uncharted waters to arrive at an acceptable understanding of reality. In today's postmodern world, where unraveling reality is a complex task, this method proves to be a valuable tool. The paper uses this framework to investigate whether or not Trump jeopardize democracy. The thesis asserts that Trump's populism has undeniably threatened democracy, while the antithesis argues the opposite. Ultimately, the

paper provides synthesis, integrating both perspectives to reconcile the differences and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of reality.

Thesis: Trump's Populism is a Threat to Democracy

Democracy is on the decline, and the resurgence of populist politics is regarded as the primary factor contributing to democratic decay. The debate over whether democracy is in crisis is a contentious topic among academic scholars. Numerous Scholars have pointed out democratic decay in their seminal discourses. Yashna Mounk has pointed out that populist politics is a witnessing reality around the world and in the US. This emerging force has jeopardized democratic values and choked institutional functioning. Larry Diamond, a political historian, has made a point regarding the increasing danger of illiberalism because of increasing authoritarianism. To Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, the crisis is not that authoritarian regimes are on the rise, rather, the subversion of democracy at the hands of democratically elected presidents and prime ministers is a real threat. David Runciman has mentioned the upcoming horrendous impacts of Trump's populism on American democracy. About the deteriorating democratic index, he said, "Democracy in America has reached a tired and crotchety middle age." The authors and historians point out that democracy is in turmoil, facing some sort of crisis in every part of the world. Even the world's oldest and most functional democracy, Washington, is not immune to these crises. The presidency of Donald Trump has shown the extent to which democracy is endangered (Foa & Mounk, 2021). Following are the demarcated areas where Trump's populist cast a shadow over the functioning of liberal democracy:

1. Decay of Democratic Norms

The decay of democratic norms under Trump's populism is one of the most visible phenomena during and after his presidency. Democratic norms are such values or standards and rules that are necessary for the smoother functioning of the democratic political process. It includes respect for the constitution and rule of law, free and fair elections, regulated language, and respect for

freedom. Many democratic norms suffered under Trump; resultantly, his tenure is considered an era of democratic backsliding (Roberts, 2019). He, by challenging the two prominent norms of the US democracy, acceptance of election results and peaceful transfer of power, has put an assault on democratic values. In US history, 21 times, a peaceful transition of power occurred between the political parties, and 52 times, from one president to another (Runciman, 2018).

The peaceful transition of power is one of the longstanding norms of the US democracy. Trump, by rejecting the election results of 2020 and blaming voter fraud, has damaged this enduring norm, which in the future can become a precedent. First, in US history, the winning president accused the system of voter fraud because of a lower popular vote than the defeated candidate (Runciman, 2018, P. 28). As a result of his rejection of the results of the 2020 elections, the most humiliating attack occurred on democracy on January 6, 2021. Trump instigated followers to storm Capitol Hill, which represents the defection from democratic norms, particularly on the extremist right, which has been fed by the support of President Donald Trump (Stanford Report, 2021) Another incident of Trump's disrespect for norms was visible from his absence from the Successor's Biden presidential ceremony. This had rarely happened in U.S. history.

1. Intolerant Political Culture

Trump's presidency has left a legacy of an intolerant political culture that disregards democratic norms. An intolerant culture reflects a lack of acceptance, respect, or accommodation for dissenting views or identities. Dissenting voices are vital for the growth of democracy, it is an indirect checker on executive and congress powers. Populist, however, abhors dissent and criticism because of their narcissistic personality. Instead of working on the flaws, they opt for ways to slam dissenting voices. Trump being a populist, has also tried to shut voices that are raised against him or his policies. For example, the removal of FBI Director James Comey and Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Trump's bad blood for Fox News is also an example of breeding hatred against the critics. He labeled Fox News chairman Rupert Murdoch as one "who is aiding and abetting the

destruction of America" (Scherer et al., 2023). Framing opponents as enemies or threats is a common tactic employed by populists.

Trump also employed federal law enforcement agencies to suppress Black Lives Matter protests. His harsh ridicule of critics, demeaning remarks about women, and crude generalizations about nations and religions have contributed to growing intolerance in both politics and society. Trump's discriminatory policies against minority groups, such as Muslims, Mexicans, and the LGBTQ community promoted intolerance in society. His verbal attacks on institutions, judges, congressmen, and minorities promoted insensitive language in politics. Instead of criticizing Obama for his performance, Trump raised the birth certificate controversy to target Obama's African origins. Such practices in any democracy promote an intolerant political culture that undermines the democratic principles of pluralism and freedom. The most significant challenge is that these political divisions seep into society and jeopardize social cohesion.

2. Political Polarization and Institutional Cleavages

Politics are polarized, the differences of opinion exist between political parties, congress members, and even party members who hold different approaches and perspectives on a single issue. This clash of opinions has always been central to the U.S. democratic system. However, since the Tea Party Movement and Trump's presidency, the intensity of political polarization has increased and reached the point where it can undermine democratic values (O'Donohue & Carothers, 2020). The tussle between mainstream political parties, democrats, and republicans has increased during the Trump era on issues of immigration, travel bans healthcare, etc. The gridlock over Obama health care, the Mexican wall, and the COVID relief fund are pertinent examples. Specifically, the gridlock over Mexican wall funding is one of the longest government shutdowns in US history. The fissure within the Republican party is evident, for example, in Republican Liz Cheney's confrontation with Trump over the Capitol Hill insurrection. She faced death threats and warnings from Trump followers, which states how confrontation in such

a polarized environment can lead to political violence. Such political confrontations affect cooperation across party lines and weaken the legislative process (O'Donohue & Carothers, 2020, P. 75).

Political polarization has incessantly increased after the Trump period. The incident of the ouster of Kevin McCarthy on October 3, 2023, speaker of House, is an extraordinary example of severe polarization in the US. The thin majority in the House vote marked the removal of the leader of the House, with eight Republicans joining 208 Democrats in voting to remove McCarthy. It happened for the first time in US history that the House remained leaderless for over a week, and it led to a ten-day government shutdown. Harvard professor Daniel Ziblatt said, "If you want to know what it looks like when democracy is in trouble, this is what it looks like" (O'Donohue & Carothers, 2020, P. 77).

3. Deepening Social Divisions

The exclusionary populism deployed by Trump is based on racism, and nativism supports the interests of one group over the grievances of the other. This populist cultural backlash leads to polarization, which somewhat concurrently is prevalent in the US society rather than in its political and legal institutions (O'Donohue & Carothers, 2020). Trump's immigration policy, travel ban, and white nationalism led to exclusionism and promoted xenophobic views against particular groups such as Muslims, Mexicans, and Afro-Americans.

His exclusionary nationalism deepened social divisions along ethno-racial lines, leaving lacunae for undemocratic forces that feed on violence and hatred. His manipulation of cultural fissures, driven by xenophobic attitudes, opened the door to polarization. As a result, racial resentment and hostility towards immigrants have surged with the US society. According to statistics released by the FBI, hate crimes have risen from 2019 to 2021 by a rate of 6%. The majority of the reported hate crimes were motivated by race, ethnicity, and re (Buchholz, 2021). OHCR's special rapporteur, in his verdict after visiting the US said that American society is malaise by systematic racism, the othering and stereotyping of Blacks, Latinos, Muslims, and Arabs (Ashwini, 2023). Batton's charge on Black Lives Matter

Movement demonstrations has exposed disparities when it comes to law enforcement and policing. Onwards the racial tensions have only deepened that are abhorrent for the cohesion of a society.

4. Erosion of Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are the cornerstone of liberal democracy. Indeed, liberalism centers around safeguarding individual rights vis-a-vis the state, serving as a bulwark against authoritarianism and excessive government control. During the making of the US Constitution, anti-federalists' recognition of the Bill of Rights pointed toward the importance of civil rights, as the founding fathers believed that democracy without rights always runs the danger of degenerating, the most feared is the tyranny of the majority (Mounk, 2019). Since the UN Charter of Human Rights, the definition has expanded for individuals across the borders such as refugee and migrant rights. During Trump's presidency, many of these rights were violated by Trump. Amnesty International report has highlighted a hundred rights that Trump has violated during his presidency. This includes ordering federal enforcement agencies to attack BLM protestors, curtail the rights of the LGBTQ community, and violation of migrant rights.

Trump's migration policy to separate children from migrant parents has garnered criticism from all the human rights organizations. Under this act, "over 2,000 children were separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border between May 5 and June 9, 2018 (Columbia Human Rights Law, 2019). These children faced broken family traumas which stirred humanitarian concerns on the southern border. Trump administration abrogated the Obama transgender rights and exempted them from the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. They were banned from serving in the military and using public washrooms based on their perceived gender. Trump censured free media, publicly referring to Journalists as the enemy of the people. Trump's policy to stop federal states from funding organization that provides abortion services raised concerns regarding safe abortion and reproductive rights. Trump's hostility against migrants and minorities contributed to a degradation of civic culture.

All the above debate illustrates that Trump has overstretched the boundaries of the US democracy through his exclusionary nationalism and identity politics. His populism has highlighted the extent to which American democracy is under threat (Foa & Mounk, 2021). Political and social polarization has led to a growing lack of trust in institutions. The congressional gridlocks and government shutdowns on important matters unveil how polarization affects law-making and federal governance. His populism has not only destroyed many Americans' trusts in their institutions. Degrading democratic norms, evacuation of trust, and erosion of liberties during his tenure has damaged democracy even if not led to complete downfall. As it is well articulated, While the republic did not collapse between 2016 and 2021, it became markedly less democratic (Levitsky et al., 2023).

Anti-thesis: Trump Populism is not Threat to Democracy

Against this thesis, there exists a group of academics who plead that Trump's populism is intrinsically lethal for democracy. They believe in the US Constitution and the system that has been robust and intact enough to absorb any shock. Further details on their arguments are given below:

1. Longstanding Liberal-Democratic Legacy

The US democratic political system is considered the most workable and resilient system in the world. French sociologist and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831, and after observing dynamics in politics, religion, and freedom in society, he appraised these principles of egalitarianism. He penned, "Americans are so enamored of equality that they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom (de Tocqueville, 2000)." The nation, with its firm belief in freedom and equality, emerged as the torchbearer for the nations oppressed by autocratic regimes.

For more than two centuries, the system has been working and serving well to the American nation. It survived the challenges of demagogue leadership, civil war, and civil discontent but stood tall amidst all this rubble. Throughout US history, there have been countless tumultuous periods where optimism was hard to

find (Galston, 2022). The founding fathers have structured the system and constitution in such a way that even after two centuries, the constitution is standing strong and resilient with only twenty-seven ratified amendments. The US stands as a model of institutional strength, demonstrated by the endurance of its venerable Constitution for more than 230 years. It pops into one's mind what makes the system indomitable for the undemocratic powers.

Some leading scholars are of the view that democracy is neither doming nor degenerating rather it is in a transitionary period. Among the scholars, Kurt Weyland has garnered special attention for commendable comparative studies of the implications of populism on democracy. To him, three three-tier federal systems, separation of power, judiciary checks, strong institutionalization along vigilant civility have contributed to democracy resilience. Similarly, they are barriers for Donald Trump as they keep check on his autocratic tendencies.

2. Rigid Constitution and Resilient Institutionalization

Upon coming to power the first challenge that populists seek to undermine is the constitution. By subverting constitutional provisions, they consolidate power to elongate their rule. For example, Erdogan after the 2016 military coup changed the Turkish constitution from parliamentary to presidential to concentrate power in executive hands. It is unlikely in the US, where the constitution is rigid and can't be changed only based on a majority vote. Unlike Tayeb Erdogan, Hugo Chavez, and Victor Orban, Trump cannot subjugate the constitution. Unless he is unable to do this, democracy is not going to fall back. As the attack on democracy begins with general legislation, populists make real progress only through constitutional amendment. Trump's inability to undermine democracy stems from his failure to enact the desired amendment in the Constitution.

Resilient institutionalization is another sanguine aspect that has guarded democracy against Trump's populism. Authoritarian elements tend to be in two situations: when institutions are weak or dysfunctional institutions along with the lingering acute socio-economic crises. The US is exempted from both scenarios, as its strong

institutions and economic stability make it improbable for a populist like Trump to turn the system into autocracy. Cristobal Rovira while making a comparison of Latin American populism comparison with that of the US has found that strong institutions, a stable two-party system, and separation of power have barred any president with a high approval rating deriding the constitution.

Another aspect is strong institutions that have barred Trump from superseding the established political system. Hence, democratic backsliding under such a constitution and firm institutionalization is unlikely. This demonstrates that the armor of the constitution and helmet of strong institutions are protecting American liberalism and pluralism from serious populist structured injuries. In a nutshell, the robustness of institutions continues to safeguard the US democracy against the illiberal transformation spearheaded by populism.

The independent judiciary has also played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of Trump on democracy. Trump's cases of electoral fraud and rigging in the 2020 general elections were struck down by the Supreme Court. The judges endured the pressure coming from his supporters and stood to affirm the law. Independent judiciary is another strong pillar of democracy that has barred Trump from overturning the election results of the 2020 elections. The state courts rejected Trump's petitions of rigged elections and voter's scam. Instead, courts charged him with a felony for inciting followers to attack Capitol Hill.

3. Absence of Serious Crisis

Democratic regression is a global reality, with populists making significant gains in states suffering from dysfunctional institutions or deep socio-economic crises. In the case of the US, however, the chances are fewer because of a serious crisis. Economic affluence and financial stability have barred Trump from playing the economic crisis. Third-world countries marked by financial inequalities and economic instability are more prone to authoritarian tendencies. In such contexts, it becomes easier to turn disillusioned people against the system that has unduly failed to deliver for them. Thus, populist often stresses a new system, led by them, can

bring about much-needed change. The poverty-stricken people are enchanted by the slogans of jobs and developmental projects. It is easy for populists to manipulate and brainwash the minds of marginalized groups. Such is not the case in Washington, which has a massive economy with a GDP per capita of \$85,370, the highest in the world. The country is guarded from volatile economic crises because of its multi-sector revenue, technological supremacy, and global corporate chains. Populists need a crisis to deploy their support while in the case of the US, the economic crisis which is most widely used as leverage is missing.

Trump's failure to secure a second tenure also reflects the shortcomings of his populist agenda. Despite attempts to mobilize the support, he was unable to overturn the election results of 2020. Populists commonly deploy any means to stay in power, as Erdogan, Orban, Chavez, and Modi have extended their rule either by bringing constitutional changes or putting rivals behind bars. However, Trump lost the elections which substantiates the fairness of the electoral process. His bid to contest reelection for the third time in 2024 also reflects the resilience of the system which is ready to fight back against a populist in a democratic way. To Weyland, the system will most likely survive Trump's second presidential tenure.

Looking at the facts, it seems that US democracy is unbreakable and strong enough to absorb the shocks of Trump's populism. The core of democracy, the institutions, judiciary, and constitution remained intact despite the Trump overhauls. However, it is too optimistic to say that democracy in the US is facing no risk at all because the norms and values are shifting which points that there is something abnormal in all this normal debate. In the next heading, the synthesis will evaluate how potential threat is populism to the US democracy. Between both the extreme debates, what is the middle ground, and where researcher's view stand?

Synthesis: Trump Populism has Eroded Democratic Values

The synthesis of both arguments—Trump's populism as a threat to democracy versus the resilience of American institutions—reveals a nuanced reality. While the U.S. constitutional

framework and institutional checks have largely withstood direct subversion, democratic culture has undergone visible deterioration during and after Trump's presidency.

While U.S. democratic structures have not collapsed under Trump, empirical evidence suggests that the democratic culture has suffered significant erosion. For instance, Freedom House reported a consistent decline in the United States' Global Freedom Score—from 90 in 2015 to 83 in 2021, reflecting growing concerns about political rights, civil liberties, and rule of law. Similarly, registered a visible decline during Trump's presidency, placing the U.S. closer to the category of "backsliding democracies." Further, public opinion data show increased polarization and decreased trust in institutions. According to a 2021 Pew Research Centre survey, only 24% of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do what is right—one of the lowest levels recorded in modern history.

In retrospect, it is undeniable that democratic norms have been undermined under the Trump presidency. He has set a precedent in US history by rejecting results, marking absence in presidential ceremonies, and inciting his followers to conduct violence. Another grave concern for democracy is deepening fissures between the political parties. Polarization between both parties is affecting the working of Congress, resulting in government shutdowns. In sitting Congress, no party had a majority, resultantly, polarization culminates in the removal of the Speaker of the House. This is where democracy faces challenges, the increasing ideological gap between the Democrats and Republicans is affecting the working relationship between government and opposition on national issues.

In short, it is not a democratic process but rather a democratic culture that has been facing assault under the influence of Trump's populism. His paranoid style of politics and legacy of intolerance, bigotry language, and identity politics have led to an increase in polarization and intolerance in society. This conversely has given rise to violence and hatred which is against tolerance, freedom, and inclusivity, thus transcending into the degeneration of democratic norms. In a nutshell, Trump is not hammering democracy with constitutional changes or authoritarian coups,

rather he is making dents on it with plain lies, warped notions, false rhetoric, and exclusionary politics. The impacts of this are more visible in a social domain where the vertical rise in hatred and violence against minorities is foreseeable.

Conclusion

Democracy facing a crisis at the global level is the most acquitted reality among all the scholarly spheres. Time and again, civil liberties and democratic norms have been undermined by political leaders. In the past, the crisis of democracy was exogenous and based on ideological differences. For example, communism repression was considered a potential threat to a democratic future. The communist threat disappeared by the late 20th century, and more complex issues, such as nationalism and identity politics, emerged alongside the age of globalization. This gave rise to populism, which is considered antagonistic to democracy, as the perils of populism, including polarization, institutional breakdown, social divisions, and the erosion of civil liberties, have threatened social cohesion and diversity.

An erudite analysis of Trump's populist persona and his exclusionary political strategy entails that democratic backsliding under his political style is an ongoing reality. The study reveals how he has upended politics with paranoid and rhetorical politics. Trump has impregnated all his election campaigns with the emotional and popular appeals to garner the attention of the masses. He has turned Populism into the new normal in American politics, which includes racial divisions, emotional appeals, false narratives, and personality politics. If this trend follows in US politics, it will have a longstanding consequence on the working of the democratic principles. Democratic norms and values have already suffered under his first tenure, they are more like to deteriorate under his second tenure.

The return of Trump to the White House has rung alarm bells regarding the future of democracy. He has also set precedents as to be the first president to make it through elections despite being charged with criminality. Despite the media backlash, establishment opposition, and Hush money trial, he has made a historic comeback. The future of American democracy is hidden behind

smoke and mirrors; it will only become clear once Trump completes his first 100 days. However, from the previous patterns and his more or less same emotional appeal and blunt wordage, one can infer that he is going to bring back the paranoid style of politics and exclusionary agenda based on White Nationalism which is the hallmark of his style. His re-election has domestic as well as global implications.

In hindsight, it is not beyond the reality that Trump is a populist figure, and his political style undoubtedly has cast a shadow over the future of democracy. The Hegelian dialectical method that this paper has deployed to draw a synthesis is a remarkable contribution to understanding the impact of Trump's populism on democracy. The reconciliatory tone that has been utilized distinguishes it from the existing discourse on Trump populism. Analyzing both spectrums of debates, and especially the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2024, has necessitated research on the topic, the future of American democracy, which at this point seems ambiguous. The question of whether U.S. democracy could survive "Trump 2.0" is a pivotal one, and this paper concludes by leaving that question open, inviting further exploration.

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