

Populism: A Threat To Democracy and National Interests

Outline

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Introduction

Thesis Statement: Though populism claims to empower the masses ostensibly, but in reality, it is a political approach aimed at seeking people's support through demagoguery. It undermines democratic institutions, fractures social cohesion and sabotages national interests by fostering authoritarianism, political instability and economic mismanagement.

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Explaining the concept of populism

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Supporters' argument about populism as a tool for strengthening democracy and preserving national interests
well organized
relevant and clear

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How does populism pose threats to democracy

- A- Erodes institutional autonomy and accelerates the democracy backsliding
- B- Promotes authoritarianism under the pretext of serving people's will
- C- Undermines the rule of law and accountability of leaders
- D- Manipulates the democratic processes of fair elections and alters electoral laws and voting system
- E- ~~Suppress the freedom of media to prevent critical coverage~~
- F- Undermines the ethos of democratic pluralism by weaponizing the masses to silence dissent

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How does populism pose threats to National interests :

- A- Fragments the social cohesion of a society under the political narrative 'Us vs. Them' mentality
- B- Fuels Trade wars by adhering to Economic nationalism and protectionist measures
- C- Leads to diplomatic isolation and erodes collective cooperation on global issues
- D- Adopts short-term economic measures, over long-term economic stability
- E- Promotes Xenophobic nationalism through strict anti-immigrant drives to preserve cultural sovereignty
- F- Stagnants human sustainable development and collective progress

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Recipe To mitigate the far-reaching impacts of populism and preserve the national interests

- A- By strengthening the democratic institutions through effective rule of law
- B- By promoting the freedom of media and speech
- C- By fostering ~~the freedom~~ political pluralism and inclusivity through dialogue and cooperation
- D- By prioritizing human sustainable development and economic growth

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Conclusion

"Populists claim to represent 'real people' against a corrupt elite, but in doing so, they reject democratic pluralism, dismiss dissenting voices, and undermine national stability."

Jan-Werner Müller

In his famous book, "What is Populism?", the author and the scholar Jan-Werner Müller unveils some undisclosed aspects of populism and its adverse impacts. He expressed his concerns that populists' claim to represent 'real people' against 'corrupt elite' is not an ideology but a political approach. It is merely a political agenda to get people's overwhelming support. He argues that populist leaders often manipulate the sentiments of common people to achieve their political motives. Dawn of 21st century witnesses the rise of populism with many populist leaders ruling countries in different parts of world. Populism poses a grave threat to democratic norms, suppresses free voice of people and media, and fans the flames of political instability at political, social and economic levels. A ship without compass may seem to move forward, but in reality, it is drifting towards a disaster. Populism operates in much the same way, presenting itself as the movement of empowerment while quietly disintegrating the foundation that sustains the load of democracy and national stability. The world, under such circumstances, puts few questions before the populist leaders and its supporters. Do the people not witness the rise of authoritarian tendencies and democracy backsliding in the guise of populism? Can populism

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truly be considered the pinnacle of political stability, good governance and economic stability? Do the supporters of populism fail to recognize its detrimental impacts such as obstruction of social progress, erosion of democratic institutions and the deterioration of global cooperation? Can populism genuinely uplift the people? Though, populism claims to empower the masses ostensibly, but in reality, it is a political approach aimed at seeking the people's enormous support through means of demagoguery. It drastically undermines the credibility of democratic institutions, fractures social unity and sabotages national interests by fostering authoritarianism, suppression of media, political instability and economic mismanagement.

Many The world is divided on the conceptual understanding of populism. Some scholars call it as an ideology while others entitle it as a political approach. Many scholars argue that populism is not a fully developed ideology like liberalism, socialism or conservatism. Instead, it is primarily a political approach, strategy or style of governance that can be adopted by different ideological groups. It mainly refers to a political approach and art of amplifying the voice of common people into a thunderous symphony of dissent. It weils their collective frustration and fury as a weapon against perceived corruption, indifference and elitism of the establishment. It thrives on some stark contrasts such as 'Us vs. Them' mentality, 'pure versus corrupt, elite'

and 'oppressed versus the powerful'. It carefully crafts all ~~these~~ emotional sentiments, molten-lava like energy and injustice into a new array of dreams full with prosperity, sustainability and swift changes. While it may democratize ~~dissent~~ and empower marginalized voices, it ~~significantly~~ fuels hyperpolarization, undermines democratic institutions and exploits public grievances for ~~political~~ gains.

Despite threats posed by populism, triggered challenges and risks, the supporters and leaders view populism as a catalyst for strengthening democratic values and preserving long-term stability and sustainability at social, political and economic fronts. Populism is viewed as a tool to enhance transparency, rule of law and greater accountability. This encourages a major chunk of population to participate in political affairs. For instance, Donald Trump under 'Make America Great Again' election campaign, encouraged and bolstered the common and ordinary people to actively play their role in US general election 2024. Trump's move witnessed an up tick in high voter turnout and political participation. He successfully defeated his strong opponent Kamala Harris by getting majority 312 votes out of 538. In the same manner, Narendra Modi's populist nationalism in India engaged millions of first-time voters in rural and underprivileged areas. Modi's populist nationalism quietly impressed the common people and paved way for his success in general election 2024 for consecutive third time. During his earlier tenure, he

introduced policies catering to underprivileged such as **Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana** (Financial Inclusion Schemes) and promoted Hindu nationalism to strengthen India's cultural identity on the global stage.

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Democracies with rise of populist

tendencies face severe challenges and risks. Populism has hindered the potential of democracies to flourish and contribute to effective rule of law and better institutional mechanism.

Populism poses an existential threat to democracy in many ways. First and foremost, populism poses one of the gravest threats to institutional autonomy and democratic norms. Populists mainly employ the tactics aimed at crippling the autonomy of institutions and democracy backsliding. Democracy backsliding occurs when the defense mechanisms of democracy such as separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law are eroded at the expense of political gains.

Populist leaders vehemently steer these autonomous institutions to fulfill their political agendas and motives, aggravating instability and unrest at social, political and economic forums. For example, Populist leader Victor Orban in Hungary, manipulated judiciary to replace it with loyalists. He created a constitution that lowered the retirement age of judges from 70 to 62. This move was genuinely a blow to judiciary which forced hundreds of judges into early retirement. According to Freedom

House report 2023, Hungary dropped from 'Free' to 'Partly free' thereby eroding EU democratic norms. There are such many examples which show that populist tendencies are a direct threat to autonomous institutions and principles of democracy.

Authoritarianism is another byproduct of populism that has put democracy in shackles. Populism often leads to the rise of authoritarian tendencies, where leaders claim to act in the name of people's will but they concentrate ^{absolute} power in their hands. Lord Acton has rightly said, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Authoritarianism ^{good well in point good} often breeds the grounds for political vengeance, political victimization and oppression against opposition. For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyib Erdogan ~~in 2017~~ shifted Turkey from parliamentary to presidential system in 2017. The move empowered him with sweeping powers. He outlawed the third largest political party and led a policy of sending several opposition leaders and journalists to jail. The country still allows democratic elections but the current status of rule of law makes it better defined as an 'Autocracy'. Hence, the autocratic inclinations are propelling the country into the quagmire of authoritarian populism.

Moreover, populism undermines the essence of rule of rule and accountability at greater extent. Populists often bypass the legal frameworks to shield themselves and allies from accountability. Such moves cripple the efficiency and credibility of law enforcement institutions significantly. They often

manage to preserve their political interests by undermining the rule of law. For example, Jair Bolsonaro, a populist leader from Brazil, intervened the judicial processes to escape accountability. He attempted to remove the officials probing his corruption cases. In the same way, the leader pardoned his supporters and granted clemency to his allies convicted of crimes. This case study paints a stark reality that pitfalls of populism are breeding grounds for erosion of rule of law and institutional instability.

Furthermore, populism tends to impact disproportionately the democratic processes of fair elections. Populist leaders exploit by introducing restrictive voting laws, altering electoral rules and disenfranchising opposition supporters to legally bar them from participating or limiting their influence in elections. In addition to these barriers, populists employ several other techniques such as gerrymandering and appointing their loyal officials to reap maximum benefits. For instance, Populist leader Nicolas Maduro, from Venezuela, rigged elections to gain victory. He used techniques aimed at barring many opposition candidates from participating in elections. He changed voting rules by restricting voters IDs and imposing high fees for candidacy. Similarly, Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2020 pushed constitutional amendments which allowed him to stay in power until 2036. Opposition figures like

Alexei Navalny were systematically excluded from elections. Hence, populism leads to unfair and non-democratic norms.

Additionally, suppression of freedom and media is one of the serious threats triggered by populism. Populist leaders censor the press media to prevent critical coverage against them. They label free media and independent journalism as 'enemies of people'. Populists brand media as a hotspot for spreading misinformation and fake news. They generally pass strict sedition laws to suffocate independent and free voices. In populist regimes, the media is usually controlled by state and it is subjected to enormous restrictions and curbs. For example, Populist regime under Victor Orban in Hungary, has taken over more than 90% of the state media. The move has severely impacted the voice of people, exacerbating the curbs on freedom. In the same way, Populist leader Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines shut down ABS-CBN, the nation's largest network over critical coverage. According to the latest Press Freedom report, Philippines ranked 132nd in press freedom which is even below Afghanistan. The report resonates the threats of populism posed to free media and independent journalism.

In addition to media suppression, Populism embraces the modes of violence against state institutions, establishment, minorities, marginalized communities and opposition leaders. Populists often weaponize majority identity against

marginalized minorities and opposition by undermining and blatantly violating the principles of pluralism. For instance, Narendra Modi's Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 offered permanent citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, ~~Buddhists~~, Jains and Parsis migrating from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The CAA excluded Muslims over various reservations. The move ignited protests and fuelled flames of communal violence. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees flagged India for institutionalized religious discrimination. Similarly, Donald Trump's January 6 Capitol riots can be viewed as a serious threat to establishment and institutions, emanating from populist tendencies. He mobilized energetic crowds over election frauds which led to a violent attack on the Congress. Hence, populism breeds grounds for weaponization of masses, communal violence and violation of pluralism.

Apart from its detrimental effects on democracy, populism constitutes a daunting challenge to national interests. Populism can destabilize social harmony, political governance and economic growth which ultimately result into the weakening of nation's progress and stability. The threats posed by its rise manifest in multiple forums. First, populism presents one of the substantial threats to social cohesion and collective unity of any nation. It mainly thrives on the popular narrative 'Us vs. Them' mentality. This popular rhetoric fractures profoundly

the societal divisions and national unity. It sows the seeds of hatred and disharmony by perpetuating violence and hate using. Populists expose the systematic inequalities in society, particularly in domains such as wealth distribution, access to education and healthcare and political participation. Populists craft emotional sentiments of common people into frustration and fury against the perceived corrupt elite, undermining the principles of social cohesion. For instance, The Occupy Wall Street Movement 2011 in New York was driven by frustration over economic inequality. The movement's popular slogan '1% vs 99%' highlighted the wealth gap between the ultra rich and the poor which compose 1% and 99% respectively. Such populist movements jeopardize the concept of social unity and harmony in a society.

Second, populism rests on idea that endorses economic nationalism and protectionist measures by pushing nations into trade wars. Populists oppose neoliberal economic policies such as tariff free markets, privatization, deregulation and minimal government interference. They view neoliberal economic world order. Instead, they prioritize their domestic industries to bloom. While preserving their domestic and local markets, populists impose heavy tariffs on imports and barriers in ease of doing businesses. They restrict the immigration of foreign labour force to protect jobs and

employment opportunities for locals. For instance, US President Donald Trump imposed heavy tariffs on Chinese imports in his earlier tenure, pushing the country into trade war with China. After securing the victory ~~for 2nd time~~ in elections and assuming ~~with~~ for second time, he has reintroduced new tariffs on imports from China, Mexico and Canada. He has imposed 10-15% tariffs on imports from these countries. In the same way, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has initiated self-reliance vision such as Atmanirbhar Bharat and 'Made in India' policy to reduce dependency on foreign countries. ~~Populism~~ The scenario paints a clear picture that ~~populism fosters~~ economic nationalism, protectionism and a dire challenge to liberal economic world order.

Third, populism Triggers global isolationist policies and erodes the culture of cooperation and collaboration. It severely hampers the concept of multilateralism and globalized world, where nations align to foreign policy centered on national interests over global interests. Populism disproportionately weakens and cripples the role of UN, WHO, EU and COP. It raises concerns that how the world will tackle challenges and risks without collective action and will power. Populists withdraw from global treaties, weaken alliances, and reject international norms blatantly. For example, Donald Trump under his populist narrative 'Make America Great Again', pulled US out of ~~Paris~~ ^{Climate} Agreement / Accord in 2017. This undermines collective action of world in tackling

climate hazards. Similarly, UK under 2016 Brexit Referendum withdrew from EU membership. The main agenda behind the move was to control illegal immigration and foster economic self-reliance. Hence, populism is a blow to global cooperation and multilateralism.

Fourth, populists in the pretext of serving people's welfare often adopt short term economic initiatives. They prioritize short term economic measures over long-term economic sustainability to apparently appease the emotional ordinary people. While adopting these short term economic goals, they paralyze the economic stability in long run. These developments engenders the durability of economic sustainability by aggravating currency devaluation, debt crises, economic crunch and liquidity, hyperinflation and several other economic woes. Populists frequently embrace measures that benefit the poor and underprivileged such as tax cutting, subsidies etc. Such moves are backed by excessive borrowing that ultimately leads to an economic overshoot. For instance, Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela funded unsustainable social projects without economic diversification. This resulted in hyperinflation in Venezuela in 2018 and led to an economic meltdown where inflation exceeded to approximately 1.3 million %.

Fifth, populism promotes the Xenophobic tendencies and nationalism through strict anti-immigration drives. Populist leaders envision that strict anti-immigration laws will preserve their

cultural sovereignty. They fear that globalization tends to leave negative imprints on their culture and national identity, violates law and order situation, and threatens national interests at social, political and economic levels. For example, Donald Trump's ongoing crackdown policy on anti-immigration shows that populism and globalization cannot go hand in hand. He blames ^{limited} immigrant for economic woes, ^{illegal} employment opportunities for locals, ^{increased} crimes against Americans. He usually calls foreign illegal immigrants as 'Aliens in US'. He has initiated strict anti-immigration drives such as fencing US-Mexico border, deporting illegal foreignness, limiting visas and many other related measures. Hence, it is clear that populism exploits national sentiments to promote xenophobic nationalism, fuelling anti-immigration policies and isolationist rhetoric.

Sixth, populism stagnates human sustainable development and over all collective progress of a society. It potentially constraints ^{the} ~~over~~ all growth of a society. It is likely very difficult for a society or a country, which is deeply stuck in the quagmire of populist tendencies, to run on the track of stability at social, political and economic platforms. Populism unequivocally acts as a barrier to human sustainable development and undermines the principles of prosperity. Rise of authoritarianism, social disharmony, economic fallouts, curbs on freedom of speech will never

pave way towards advancement. The populist tendencies will continue to weaken global as well as national progress by eroding institutional autonomy, multilateralism, global stability and inequitable growth.

Though populism has severely impacted and jeopardized democracy and national interests at greater extent, it is not beyond reparation yet. The situation warrants a recipe that can mitigate the far-reaching effects of populism and preserve the national interests. To begin with, the revival of democratic institutions is the need of hour. Institutions should be democratized to deliver effective rule of law and better forums for greater accountability. Constitutional checks and balances should be employed to prevent authoritarian tendencies and democracy backsliding. Pillars of democracy such as independence of judiciary, transparency, accountability and fair conduct of elections should be prevailed in regard to counter populist designs. The more institutions are democratized, the more impactful and inclusive the outcomes will be.

Moreover, the promotion of freedom of media and speech will be cornerstone in mitigating the detrimental impacts of populism and preserving the national interests at greater levels. Freedom of media will serve as a powerful tool in exposing the malign designs and desires of populist regimes. It can be instrumental in paving way for greater transparency and accountability. Free media and speech

significantly discourages misinformation and propaganda spread by populists and counters it with authentic facts, figures and reports.

Furthermore, political pluralism can be robust apparatus in tackling challenges and threats posed by populism. Political pluralism spins around the axis of unity, harmony and peace among different factions, different political parties and different religions. It propagates the idea of inclusivity which fosters dialogue, cooperation and diplomacy over discord, dissent and disagreement. It employs mutual consensus and collaboration among all people belonging from different backgrounds by disallowing the seeds of discord, disunity and abhorrence. It prepares a strong foundation for human sustainable development, economic growth, and collective progress. Embracing political pluralism can be fruitful in dismantling the differences paving ways for authoritarian tendencies, political vengeance and social instability.

Additionally, prioritizing human sustainable development and economic growth is one of the most viable options to break the bones of populist trends. Human sustainable development and economic growth mainly rely on investing in education, health, renewable energy, infrastructure and technological advancements. These key pillars of human sustainable development should be utilized effectively to produce fruitful outcomes. Human sustainable

development and economic growth reduce the widening gap between the poor and rich elite, setting the stage for equitable social growth and development.

To conclude, it is evident that populism poses an imminent threat to democracy and national interests.

Populism, though ~~genuinely~~ often rooted in public grievances and social inequality, presents a direct challenge to democratic norms and stability at social, political and economic front. Public grievance and emotional sentiments are negatively portrayed in the pretext of populist's rhetorics. It severely erodes institutional autonomy, undermines judicial independence, curbs freedom of media and speech, prioritizes short-term populist policies and sows seeds of discord and disunity. Populism may have far-reaching and detrimental impacts on democracy and national interests, but it can still be rectified. The road to enhance democratic values and preserve national interests warrants some pragmatic approaches. These approaches ~~intend~~ can be flourished by strengthening democratic institutions, promoting free voices, fostering inclusivity through cooperation and dialogue, and prioritizing human sustainable development and economic growth. In nutshell, overcoming populism demands unwavering will power, steadfast determination, and resolute commitment to democratic integrity and national progress.