

Constitutional Populism: Redefining Legitimacy in the Age of Strongmen Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of constitutional populism marks a defining feature of 21st-century politics, where strongmen leaders across democracies and hybrid regimes are redefining the meaning and source of political legitimacy. This study examines constitutional populism as a global phenomenon manifested in the leadership practices of figures such as Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Each of these leaders invokes “the will of the people” as the supreme constitutional principle, thereby undermining institutional checks, judicial independence, and liberal pluralism. Drawing on theories of constitutionalism, populism, and democratic legitimacy, this research explores how populist constitutionalism reconfigures the moral and legal foundations of governance. The study employs a comparative qualitative methodology, analyzing constitutional discourse, institutional transformation, and the rhetoric of legitimacy across selected cases. Findings indicate that constitutional populism operates not as outright authoritarianism but as a transformative mode that weaponized constitutional

mechanisms to concentrate power and delegitimize dissent. The paper argues that this populist reinterpretation of constitutional democracy represents a critical challenge to liberal constitutionalism and global governance norms. Finally, it outlines strategies for safeguarding constitutional integrity in the age of populist personalization, emphasizing transnational legal accountability, civic mobilization, and renewed democratic education as counterbalances to illiberal populism.

Keywords: Constitutional Populism; Democratic Legitimacy; Strongmen Politics; Global Comparative Politics; Constitutionalism and Power; Authoritarian Legalism; Populist Governance

Introduction

Constitutional populism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary politics, signaling a profound transformation in the relationship between citizens, constitutions, and the exercise of state power. Tushnet, M. (2020). Unlike classical authoritarianism, which relies on overt repression and the suspension of legal norms, constitutional populism operates within the framework of formal institutions while systematically reshaping them to consolidate personal authority. In the global context, leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey exemplify this phenomenon. Koch, C. M. (2021). These leaders articulate their legitimacy as rooted in the “will of the people,” a rhetorical strategy that allows them to claim moral supremacy over traditional institutions such as courts, legislatures, and independent oversight bodies. The rise of constitutional populism is intertwined with broader socio-political dynamics, including increasing economic inequality, political polarization, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the amplification of mass-mediated communication channels. Populist leaders exploit these conditions to mobilize support, delegitimize opposition, and reinterpret constitutional norms to favor executive authority. In this context, constitutional texts are no longer neutral frameworks constraining power; they become instruments for political legitimation, selectively applied to entrench the agenda of the ruling elite. Cannilla, A. (2022).

Globalization, social media proliferation, and the decline of traditional party politics have further facilitated this trend. In established democracies, populist leaders

challenge the assumptions of liberal constitutionalism, emphasizing majoritarian sovereignty over minority rights, and often framing institutional checks as obstacles to the popular mandate. In hybrid regimes, constitutional populism enables the consolidation of personalized power while maintaining the formal trappings of democratic legitimacy. This study seeks to investigate constitutional populism from a comparative international perspective, analyzing how it redefines legitimacy in different political and cultural contexts. Bellamy, R. (2023). The research aims to answer three central questions: first, how do populist leaders reinterpret constitutional norms to justify personal authority? Second, what institutional mechanisms are modified or bypassed in this process? Third, what are the broader implications for democratic stability and global governance norms? By examining multiple cases across continents, this research situates constitutional populism within contemporary debates on democratic backsliding, institutional resilience, and global constitutional theory. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategies through which populist leaders exploit legal frameworks and mass mobilization to consolidate power while maintaining a veneer of legality and democratic legitimacy. Vitale, D., & Girard, R. (2022). Moreover, this study highlights the tension between formal constitutionalism and the populist appeal to the people, illustrating the dynamic interplay between law, politics, and societal perceptions of authority. In sum, the emergence of constitutional populism represents both a challenge and an opportunity for comparative political analysis. On one hand, it destabilizes established liberal norms and tests the resilience of constitutional democracy. On the other hand, it provides a critical lens through which to examine the evolving nature of legitimacy, governance, and the intersection of populist politics with constitutional law. This research, therefore, serves as a timely exploration of one of the most pressing phenomena in contemporary political life, offering insights that are globally relevant and theoretically significant. Brigeovich, A., & Wagner, C. (2025).

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on constitutional populism has expanded significantly over the past decade, reflecting the growing prevalence of strongmen leaders across democracies and hybrid regimes. Mushtaq, S., Mazari, F., & Ahsan, S. (2024).

Central to this literature is the tension between constitutional formalism and populist reinterpretation, wherein constitutions are both instruments and objects of political struggle. Populism is conceptualized as a political logic that dichotomizes society into “the people” versus “the elite,” thereby legitimizing a concentration of authority in the executive branch while undermining independent institutions. This theoretical foundation has been widely applied to analyze how contemporary leaders manipulate constitutional provisions to expand personal power without overtly violating the law.

Recent comparative studies highlight the mechanisms through which constitutional populism operates. Democratic backsliding in established democracies is frequently facilitated by legalistic populism, where leaders exploit procedural loopholes to erode institutional checks gradually. In the United States, Trump’s tenure exemplifies this dynamic, as presidential rhetoric and executive actions repeatedly challenged judicial independence and legislative oversight under the guise of representing the popular will. Similarly, in Hungary, Orbán’s administration systematically amended constitutional provisions and restructured judicial appointments to consolidate party control, illustrating the institutionalized dimension of constitutional populism. da Cruz, T. P. (2024).

In the Global South, constitutional populism is intertwined with nationalist rhetoric and identity politics. Modi’s governance in India combines populist mobilization with constitutional reinterpretation, particularly in the context of citizenship and federal-state relations, reinforcing majoritarian norms at the expense of institutional pluralism. Bolsonaro in Brazil demonstrates a similar strategy, leveraging public dissatisfaction and legal ambiguities to defend controversial executive measures while maintaining formal compliance with constitutional texts. Erdoğan’s Turkey represents a hybrid case, where populist strategies are institutionalized through constitutional amendments that expand presidential powers, weaken parliamentary checks, and restructure the judiciary. Bauer, M. W. (2024).

The literature also underscores the role of communication and media in sustaining constitutional populism. Social media platforms, partisan news channels, and populist rhetoric allow leaders to bypass traditional institutional scrutiny,

appealing directly to mass constituencies and constructing a narrative of moral and constitutional legitimacy. The combination of media personalization and populist discourse creates a perception that the executive embodies the people's sovereign will, rendering institutional opposition morally suspect. Tóth, B., Nowak, A., Demir, A., & González, R. (2025).

Scholars have debated the normative implications of constitutional populism. While some argue that populist constitutional reinterpretation represents a threat to liberal democracy and institutional stability, others suggest it may serve as a corrective mechanism, empowering historically marginalized majorities and challenging entrenched elites. This duality reflects the complexity of evaluating legitimacy in contexts where legalistic conformity coexists with procedural manipulation and executive dominance. Kappé, M. M. (2025).

Emerging research emphasizes comparative analysis to understand the variable institutional impacts of constitutional populism across political systems. Cross-national studies reveal that robust legal frameworks, independent judiciaries, and entrenched civil society institutions mitigate the risks associated with populist reinterpretation, whereas weaker or transitional systems are more vulnerable to executive overreach. Constitutional populism cannot be treated as a monolithic phenomenon; it manifests differently in established liberal democracies, hybrid regimes, and emerging democracies, influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. Yilmaz, I. (2024).

In summary, existing scholarship provides a robust conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding constitutional populism, highlighting its mechanisms, institutional consequences, and societal impacts. However, gaps remain in comparative analysis, particularly concerning the interaction between constitutional norms, populist rhetoric, and executive power in diverse geopolitical settings. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining multiple international cases, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how constitutional populism redefines legitimacy in the age of strongmen leaders. Rösch, F. (2025).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study situates constitutional populism at the intersection of populist political theory, constitutionalism, and democratic legitimacy.

At its core, constitutional populism represents a distinctive mode of governance where populist leaders operate within formal legal frameworks while simultaneously reshaping these structures to consolidate personal authority. This approach combines insights from political theory, comparative politics, and legal studies to understand how strongmen leaders maintain legitimacy under the guise of constitutional compliance. Tourish, D. (2024).

Populist Theory provides the foundational lens for this analysis. Populism is understood as a political logic that constructs society into two antagonistic camps: “the people” versus “the elite.” Populist leaders claim to embody the general will of the people, often bypassing institutional checks and established norms. Populism is not inherently authoritarian; rather, it is a flexible strategy that can operate within liberal or illiberal contexts, depending on institutional resilience. In the case of constitutional populism, this strategy manifests through selective interpretation and application of constitutional provisions to justify expanded executive power.

Constitutionalism as a theoretical concept emphasizes the role of formal rules and principles in constraining political authority and protecting minority rights. Constitutional norms are meant to balance power across branches of government, ensuring accountability and legitimacy. However, in the age of strongmen leaders, constitutional provisions are often reinterpreted, amended, or strategically deployed to reinforce populist authority. Authoritarian legalism describes the process in which the law is instrumentalized not to limit power but to legitimize executive dominance. Orbán’s Hungary and Erdoğan’s Turkey demonstrate systematic amendments and judicial restructuring, embedding populist agendas within constitutional frameworks. Tourish, D. (2024).

Democratic Legitimacy Theory complements this framework by exploring the sources and perception of political authority. Legitimacy depends on both procedural legality and popular consent. Constitutional populism challenges this balance by elevating popular will over institutional constraints, thereby creating a hybrid form of legitimacy: one that is procedurally constitutional yet substantively majoritarian. This dynamic is visible in Trump’s use of executive orders and rhetoric, Modi’s centralization of authority, and Bolsonaro’s legal defenses of controversial policy decisions. Gutmann, J. (2025).

The framework also incorporates the concept of institutional resilience, which assesses the capacity of political institutions to withstand populist reinterpretation without losing normative authority. Strong judicial independence, free media, and active civil society can buffer against the destabilizing effects of constitutional populism, while weak or transitional institutions are vulnerable to executive capture. This perspective guides the comparative analysis across the selected countries, highlighting both the mechanisms of populist consolidation and the varying degrees of institutional vulnerability. Tushnet, M., & Bugarič, B. (2021).

Finally, the framework accounts for global and technological contexts, including the role of mass media, social networks, and digital communication. Populist leaders use these platforms to construct a direct relationship with citizens, bypassing traditional institutional checks, and framing opposition as elitist or unconstitutional. Media personalization amplifies the perception that strongmen leaders are the sole embodiment of national sovereignty, reinforcing the legitimacy of constitutional populism. Blokker, P. (2020). In sum, this study's theoretical framework integrates three interconnected dimensions: populist political logic, constitutional reinterpretation, and democratic legitimacy. By combining these perspectives, it provides a robust lens for analyzing how strongmen leaders operate within legal frameworks while reshaping institutional authority. This approach enables a comparative understanding of constitutional populism across different political systems, revealing the mechanisms through which legality, morality, and popular consent converge to sustain contemporary strongmen leadership. Sledzińska-Simon, A. (2023).

Analysis

The analysis of constitutional populism across the United States, India, Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey demonstrates both common strategies employed by strongmen leaders and variations shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. In all cases, populist leaders invoke the “will of the people” as a primary source of legitimacy, thereby challenging existing checks and balances, reshaping legal frameworks, and consolidating executive power. Despite differences in historical, political, and legal systems, a comparative analysis reveals a set of recurring

mechanisms and patterns that define constitutional populism globally.

In the United States, Donald Trump's presidency illustrates how populist rhetoric can influence constitutional interpretation without formal amendment. Executive orders, attempts to bypass judicial decisions, and claims of election fraud exemplify strategies where the leader positions himself as the ultimate interpreter of popular will. While U.S. institutional structures, including federal courts and Congress, provided constraints, the use of media and direct appeals to supporters allowed for the consolidation of a personalized political base that perceived executive action as inherently legitimate. This case highlights the tension between formal constitutional constraints and populist interpretations of authority.

In India, Narendra Modi's administration demonstrates how constitutional populism interacts with federalism, religious nationalism, and majoritarian politics. Legislative changes, including the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), reflect a populist reinterpretation of legal provisions to favor a particular vision of the people. Modi's rhetoric, emphasizing the sovereignty of the majority and portraying institutional opposition as elite obstruction, exemplifies the strategic use of populist legitimacy to bypass traditional checks. The federal structure and robust judiciary mitigate, but do not fully prevent, executive consolidation, revealing the partial vulnerability of institutional frameworks.

Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro presents another variant. Bolsonaro's populism combines executive assertiveness with delegitimization of media and judicial oversight. Public statements criticizing the judiciary and electoral institutions, alongside attempts to expand presidential authority during crises, exemplify constitutional populism in action. Although Brazil's democratic framework maintains formal separation of powers, populist leaders can exploit legal ambiguities to consolidate influence, particularly when mass mobilization supports executive initiatives. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán institutionalized populist strategies through formal constitutional amendments. By restructuring the judiciary, redefining constitutional provisions, and embedding party control into legal mechanisms, Orbán exemplifies the extreme end of constitutional populism: the institutionalization of personalized authority within ostensibly legitimate frameworks. The Fidesz government's control over media and civil society further

reinforces legitimacy derived from popular support, demonstrating a seamless fusion of legalism and populist political logic.

In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's tenure illustrates constitutional populism in a hybrid regime. Constitutional amendments expanded presidential powers, reduced parliamentary oversight, and modified judicial appointments. Erdoğan's rhetoric frames institutional opposition as illegitimate while asserting that popular sovereignty grants moral and legal authority to the executive. The Turkish case highlights how populist reinterpretation can occur in systems with weak institutional checks, enabling near-complete executive consolidation.

Across these cases, several key mechanisms of constitutional populism emerge. First, the centralization of power within the executive branch is a recurring strategy, achieved either through formal constitutional amendments or strategic reinterpretation of existing provisions. Second, populist leaders employ rhetoric that delegitimizes opposition and institutions, framing them as obstacles to the popular mandate. Third, media and social platforms are leveraged to directly mobilize supporters, bypassing institutional scrutiny and enhancing perceptions of legitimacy. Fourth, the degree of institutional resilience significantly shapes the impact of populism: strong, independent judiciaries and civil society can limit executive overreach, while weaker institutions allow for extensive personalization of power.

Finally, comparative analysis reveals variation in outcomes based on political context. Established democracies like the United States demonstrate institutional resistance that constrains populist ambitions, whereas hybrid regimes such as Turkey and Hungary show how constitutional populism can be fully institutionalized. Emerging democracies, including India and Brazil, occupy an intermediate position where populist leaders can exploit legal ambiguities, but institutional constraints retain partial effectiveness. These variations underscore the importance of political culture, historical context, and institutional design in shaping the manifestation of constitutional populism.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that constitutional populism is a global phenomenon with consistent strategies: the personalization of power, reinterpretation of constitutional norms, and rhetorical legitimation through appeals

to the people. While mechanisms are similar, the extent and effectiveness of populist consolidation vary across institutional contexts, illustrating the interplay between legal frameworks, political strategy, and societal perceptions. This comparative perspective provides insight into the evolving nature of legitimacy in the age of strongmen leaders, offering a foundation for subsequent discussion, findings, and policy recommendations.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of constitutional populism across the United States, India, Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey underscores the intricate ways in which strongmen leaders reinterpret constitutional norms to consolidate power while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy. Mushtaq, S. (2024). The findings reveal that populist leaders employ a combination of rhetorical, legal, and institutional strategies to reshape governance in their favor. This discussion contextualizes these strategies within broader political theory, highlights patterns across diverse political systems, and examines implications for democratic legitimacy and global governance norms.

First, the analysis confirms that constitutional populism operates at the intersection of legality and morality. Leaders like Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Orbán, and Erdoğan justify policy actions and executive expansion by appealing to the popular will, effectively framing opposition institutions as obstacles to the sovereign people. Unlike overt authoritarianism, constitutional populism preserves legal forms while subverting the intended function of those forms, creating a hybrid system where executive authority is both procedurally legitimate and substantively majoritarian. Olbrich, E., & Banisch, S. (2021).

Second, institutional resilience mediates the impact of populist strategies. In the United States, the separation of powers and independent judiciary constrained attempts at executive overreach, illustrating the role of robust institutional checks. By contrast, Hungary and Turkey demonstrate how weaker or restructured institutions can be leveraged to institutionalize populist authority. Orbán's constitutional amendments and Erdoğan's judicial restructuring exemplify the extreme potential of constitutional populism when combined with limited institutional resistance. India and Brazil represent intermediate cases, where

federalism, judicial oversight, and civil society provide partial barriers but allow significant executive consolidation under the guise of majoritarian legitimacy. Wang, Y., Yu, R., Zhongyuan, W., & He, J. (2025).

Third, media and communication channels are central to sustaining constitutional populism. Social media, partisan news networks, and public rallies enable direct engagement with supporters, bypassing institutional scrutiny and enhancing perceptions of legitimacy. These channels facilitate leader-centric politics, creating the impression that the populist executive embodies the moral and constitutional will of the people. This pattern underscores the growing role of digital politics in reinforcing populist narratives, particularly in contexts where traditional institutions are perceived as slow or disconnected from citizens' interests. Yang, W. (2024).

Fourth, the normative implications of constitutional populism are complex. While it can empower historically marginalized majorities and challenge entrenched elites, it simultaneously undermines liberal constitutional norms, erodes checks and balances, and may lead to democratic backsliding. Incremental legalistic manipulation can cumulatively weaken democracy, producing a gradual erosion of institutional authority. This duality highlights the tension between formal legality and substantive democratic principles, raising questions about how legitimacy should be measured and maintained in contemporary governance. Major, S., & Tomašević, A. (2023).

Fifth, cross-national patterns reveal both convergence and divergence. Convergence exists in the universal reliance on populist rhetoric, reinterpretation of constitutional provisions, and personalization of executive power. Divergence arises from institutional, cultural, and historical differences: established democracies retain functional checks, emerging democracies experience partial institutional vulnerability, and hybrid regimes exhibit full institutionalization of populist authority. This variation emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive analysis, demonstrating that constitutional populism is neither uniform nor inevitable but mediated by political structures and societal conditions. Brigeovich, A., & Wagner, C. (2025).

Finally, theoretical integration strengthens the understanding of constitutional populism. By combining populist theory, constitutionalism, and democratic legitimacy, this study highlights how legal frameworks can be instrumentally repurposed to support executive authority while maintaining perceived legitimacy. It also illuminates the dynamic interaction between institutional design, political strategy, and public perception, illustrating that constitutional populism is both a legal and sociopolitical phenomenon. Cannilla, A. (2022).

In conclusion, the discussion establishes that constitutional populism is a globally relevant, context-dependent phenomenon. It represents a shift in the exercise and perception of legitimacy, where strongmen leaders exploit constitutional mechanisms, popular mobilization, and media channels to centralize power while retaining a veneer of legality. Understanding these patterns is essential for developing strategies to safeguard democratic governance, reinforce institutional resilience, and maintain normative constitutional principles in the face of populist reinterpretation.

The findings from the comparative analysis reveal significant insights into the nature, mechanisms, and consequences of constitutional populism in contemporary politics. Constitutional populism, as evidenced in the United States, India, Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey, demonstrates a consistent pattern where strongmen leaders reinterpret legal frameworks to consolidate personal authority while maintaining a veneer of constitutional legitimacy. This phenomenon challenges classical notions of constitutionalism, which are premised on the separation of powers, institutional checks, and impartial rule of law. Populist leaders, however, exploit constitutional ambiguities and procedural loopholes to assert moral and political supremacy, thereby redefining legitimacy in terms of popular consent rather than institutional compliance.

A critical observation is that constitutional populism blurs the line between legality and legitimacy. While actions may technically conform to formal rules, they often contravene the spirit of constitutional democracy by weakening oversight mechanisms and undermining institutional autonomy. For example, Trump's executive orders and judicial confrontations, Modi's federal centralization and legislative interventions, Bolsonaro's challenges to the judiciary, Orbán's systemic

constitutional amendments, and Erdoğan's consolidation of presidential authority all demonstrate this duality. This confirms Ferejohn's (2020) argument that constitutional populism represents a hybrid form of governance: legally sanctioned yet substantively illiberal.

Another key aspect is the instrumentalization of rhetoric and media. Across all cases, leaders appeal directly to the public through mass media, social networks, and populist messaging. This strategy reinforces the perception that the executive embodies the people's will, delegitimizing traditional institutions as elitist or obstructive. Norris and Inglehart (2021) emphasize that such personalization amplifies support for populist measures and normalizes the concentration of power, creating a feedback loop between leader rhetoric, public perception, and institutional compliance.

The comparative perspective highlights the role of institutional resilience in shaping the outcomes of constitutional populism. Established democracies, like the United States, retain structural checks and a vibrant civil society that can constrain executive overreach, even under sustained populist pressure. Emerging democracies, such as India and Brazil, experience partial institutional constraints, allowing populist leaders to manipulate legal ambiguities while facing occasional resistance. Hybrid regimes, notably Hungary and Turkey, demonstrate how weak or malleable institutions enable full institutionalization of constitutional populism, effectively embedding personal authority into the legal and political architecture.

The discussion also emphasizes the normative tension between majoritarianism and liberal democracy. Constitutional populism prioritizes the perceived popular will over institutional safeguards, creating a paradox in which leaders claim legitimacy while eroding democratic norms. This raises important questions about the sustainability of liberal constitutionalism in an era of mass-mediated politics and increasing polarization. The interplay between legality and moral authority becomes a defining characteristic of modern populist regimes.

Furthermore, constitutional populism often intersects with identity politics and nationalism, reinforcing exclusionary narratives to mobilize support. Modi's India illustrates this through religious majoritarian policies, Bolsonaro's Brazil

emphasizes conservative cultural identity, and Erdoğan's Turkey integrates Islamist-nationalist discourse. Such strategies enhance the perceived legitimacy of leaders among their supporters while marginalizing opposition voices, deepening societal polarization and challenging pluralist principles.

Finally, this discussion highlights the global implications of constitutional populism. The phenomenon is not limited to a single region or political culture but represents a broader transformation in governance, legitimacy, and constitutional interpretation. It signals the potential erosion of liberal norms globally, requiring scholars and policymakers to reconsider strategies for institutional resilience, legal safeguards, and civic engagement. Comparative analysis provides a foundation for understanding both the mechanisms through which populist leaders consolidate power and the structural interventions necessary to mitigate the destabilizing effects on democratic systems.

In conclusion, constitutional populism represents a transformative force in contemporary politics, redefining legitimacy through a combination of legal reinterpretation, rhetorical appeal, and executive consolidation. While the phenomenon exhibits consistent strategies globally, its impact is mediated by institutional robustness, political culture, and civic resistance. Understanding these dynamics is essential for preserving constitutional democracy, ensuring accountability, and fostering sustainable governance in the age of strongmen leaders. This discussion provides a critical bridge between empirical analysis and the formulation of actionable policy recommendations, highlighting both the theoretical significance and practical urgency of addressing constitutional populism worldwide

Findings

The analysis and discussion of constitutional populism across the United States, India, Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey reveal several key findings. These findings highlight the mechanisms, patterns, and implications of strongmen leadership within constitutional frameworks and provide insights into global trends of populist governance.

Centralization of Executive Power

Constitutional populism consistently demonstrates the centralization of authority in the executive branch. Leaders use formal constitutional mechanisms, legal

ambiguities, and executive decrees to expand power. In Hungary and Turkey, constitutional amendments and judicial restructuring institutionalize this centralization, while in the United States, India, and Brazil, executive discretion and policy reinterpretation achieve similar effects without fully dismantling institutional checks. This centralization is often justified through appeals to popular sovereignty, positioning the leader as the ultimate interpreter of the people's will.

Delegitimization of Opposition and Institutions

Strongmen leaders employ rhetoric that undermines judicial, legislative, and media institutions, portraying them as elitist, corrupt, or obstacles to the people's mandate. Trump's repeated claims of judicial overreach, Modi's criticism of state governments opposing central policies, Bolsonaro's attacks on the judiciary, Orbán's portrayal of opposition parties as enemies of the state, and Erdoğan's framing of dissent as anti-national illustrate a shared strategy. This delegitimization reinforces executive authority and weakens institutional resistance, enabling populist reinterpretation of constitutional provisions.

Use of Media and Direct Communication

Constitutional populists leverage social media, mass communication, and public appearances to bypass institutional channels and directly mobilize supporters. Digital platforms amplify messages, create leader-centric narratives, and cultivate perceptions of legitimacy derived from popular consent. This strategy not only reinforces the moral authority of strongmen leaders but also diminishes reliance on traditional institutional validation, further embedding populist governance in public consciousness.

Variability of Institutional Resilience

The impact of constitutional populism varies according to the strength of political institutions. Established democracies like the U.S. maintain functional judicial, legislative, and civil society checks that limit the scope of populist overreach. Emerging democracies such as India and Brazil experience partial institutional vulnerabilities that allow selective executive consolidation. Hybrid regimes like Hungary and Turkey demonstrate the full institutionalization of populist authority, revealing the critical role of institutional resilience in mediating outcomes.

Rhetorical Legitimacy and Perception of Popular Will

Across all cases, leaders derive legitimacy not solely from formal legality but from perceptions of representing the popular will. Populist rhetoric frames executive actions as morally justified, while institutional opposition is portrayed as obstructive. This perception-based legitimacy allows leaders to navigate and manipulate constitutional provisions, reinforcing their authority within both legal and public spheres.

Cross-National Patterns and Contextual Differences

Comparative analysis shows convergent strategies—centralized power, institutional Delegitimization, and direct mobilization—while contextual differences determine the effectiveness and sustainability of constitutional populism. Institutional structures, political culture, and historical experiences influence the degree to which leaders can reinterpret constitutions without facing significant constraints.

Normative Implications

The study confirms that constitutional populism presents a dual effect: empowering previously marginalized constituencies while undermining liberal democratic norms. This duality illustrates the tension between majoritarian appeals and institutional safeguards, highlighting the ongoing challenge of maintaining balanced legitimacy in contemporary politics.

Policy Implications

The emergence of constitutional populism across global democracies and hybrid regimes carries profound policy implications for governance, institutional integrity, and democratic stability. First, it underscores the need to strengthen institutional resilience. Robust, independent judiciaries and legislatures are essential to counteract executive overreach and preserve constitutional balance. Legal safeguards must be continually updated to prevent loopholes that allow populist reinterpretation. Second, constitutional populism highlights the importance of civic education and public awareness. Citizens must understand both the letter and the spirit of constitutional norms, as public perception heavily influences populist legitimacy. Strengthening democratic literacy empowers voters to critically assess populist claims and reinforces accountability mechanisms. Third, media and communication policies require attention. The centrality of social media in

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amplifying populist narratives necessitates regulatory frameworks that promote transparency, combat misinformation, and preserve independent journalistic standards without undermining free expression. Fourth, constitutional populism affects international relations and global governance. Leaders leveraging populist legitimacy often pursue nationalist or unilateral policies that challenge multilateral agreements, trade norms, and international law. Policymakers must anticipate these risks and strengthen transnational mechanisms to uphold cooperative norms while respecting domestic sovereignty. Fifth, the phenomenon has implications for minority protection and human rights. Populist reinterpretation of constitutional provisions often marginalizes vulnerable groups. Policymakers must prioritize inclusive legislation and oversight to ensure that majoritarian appeals do not undermine equality or civil liberties. Finally, constitutional populism demonstrates that policy design must integrate long-term institutional foresight. Incremental legal manipulation can accumulate into significant democratic backsliding. Policymakers should adopt proactive strategies to maintain institutional balance, prevent executive overreach, and preserve public trust.

Conclusion

Constitutional populism represents a transformative phenomenon in contemporary global politics, fundamentally reshaping the understanding of legitimacy, governance, and the exercise of executive power. Across democracies and hybrid regimes, leaders such as Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan illustrate how populist strategies exploit constitutional mechanisms to consolidate authority while maintaining the appearance of legality. This study has demonstrated that constitutional populism is not merely a rhetorical or political tactic; it is a structural approach that systematically aligns institutional frameworks, executive prerogatives, and public perception to strengthen the personal authority of the leader. The analysis confirms that populist leaders derive legitimacy by positioning themselves as the embodiment of the people's will, creating a moral claim that often supersedes procedural checks. Legal reinterpretation, executive centralization, and Delegitimization of opposition institutions are employed as instruments to reinforce authority. Media and social communication platforms are leveraged to construct narratives that circumvent

traditional oversight mechanisms, further embedding populist influence in public consciousness. Comparative evidence shows that the effectiveness of constitutional populism varies depending on institutional resilience, political culture, and historical context, with hybrid regimes being the most susceptible to full institutionalization of populist authority. From a normative perspective, constitutional populism presents a dual challenge. On one hand, it empowers constituencies previously marginalized by entrenched elites, potentially increasing democratic participation and responsiveness. On the other hand, it undermines the foundational principles of liberal democracy, weakens checks and balances, and creates conditions for democratic backsliding. This duality underscores the need for nuanced understanding and context-sensitive policy responses that balance majority empowerment with protection of institutional integrity and minority rights. The study's comparative approach highlights several key lessons. Strong institutional frameworks, independent judiciaries, robust civil society, and informed citizenry serve as critical bulwarks against the destabilizing effects of constitutional populism. Conversely, legal ambiguities, weakened institutions, and media manipulation facilitate populist consolidation. Therefore, maintaining democratic resilience requires proactive measures, including legal safeguards, civic education, media literacy, and international cooperation, to ensure that populist claims do not erode constitutional norms.

In conclusion, constitutional populism represents a global and persistent challenge to democratic governance, requiring scholars, policymakers, and civil society to engage in vigilant monitoring, comparative learning, and strategic intervention. By understanding the mechanisms, patterns, and consequences of populist reinterpretation of constitutions, societies can better navigate the complexities of contemporary politics. The rise of strongmen leaders in diverse political systems emphasizes that legitimacy is no longer solely derived from legal compliance but increasingly from perceived alignment with the people's will. Safeguarding democracy in this context demands a multidimensional approach that integrates institutional, societal, and global perspectives, ensuring that constitutional frameworks continue to serve as instruments of accountable governance rather than tools for personal power consolidation. Ultimately, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on constitutional populism, providing insights

into its theoretical foundations, practical manifestations, and implications for democratic stability. By adopting a comparative perspective, the research underscores the universal relevance of these challenges while acknowledging context-specific variations. Addressing constitutional populism requires sustained attention to the interplay between law, politics, and society, and a commitment to preserving the principles of justice, equity, and institutional accountability in the age of strongmen leaders.

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