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Illiberal Playbooks: A Comparative Study of Viktor Orban and Donald Trump's Populist Strategies

Isa Kasum

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to redefine populism, which exists in many countries that make up the international community and is understood as a political phenomenon, and to analyze the possible similarities between Prime Minister Viktor Mihaly Orban of Hungary (2010–present) and current President Donald John Trump of the United States. In this context, the study identifies two areas of focus: the theoretical approaches to populism and the effects of populism on the representative democracy of a nation-state. Considering the theoretical approaches and interpretive analyses of populism, it can be concluded that both Viktor Orban and Donald J. Trump can be regarded as populist leaders from political-strategic and ideal-discursive perspectives. The theoretical approaches to populism described in this article allow for the construction of a theoretical framework aimed at understanding the populist phenomenon and the dynamics of contemporary populist leaders.

Keywords: Populism, Viktor Orban, Donald J. Trump, Populist Leaders, International Politics

Introduction

Populism has been a highly debated concept in every era. Despite extensive discussions by numerous researchers, including Laclau (2005), Muller (2016), Moffitt (2016), and Hawkins (2017), there is no consensus on how to conceptualize it. The term is often used interchangeably with "anti-establishment" regardless of political ideology, and it is closely associated with emotional states, particularly anger and frustration, both among leaders and their voters (Muller, 2016, p. 1).

In recent years, Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister since 2010, has exemplified a distinctive type of right-wing populism. Orban's strategy has involved positioning himself as the protector of Hungarian identity and European Christian values against perceived threats such as immigration and liberalism. His rhetoric has mobilized fears related to national sovereignty and identity, leveraging xenophobia and Euroscepticism to consolidate political power (Haraszti, 2015; Illes, Korosenyi, & Metz, 2018). Orban's populism not only challenges domestic liberal democratic institutions but also strains Hungary's relationship with the European Union, as his administration actively dismantles judicial independence and curtails media freedoms (Deak, 2013).

This study is divided into three sections. The first section presents theoretical approaches to populism. The second section discusses the impacts of populism on democracy. Finally, the third section analyzes Viktor Orban's leadership within the framework of populism, comparing it with that of Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States, and examining how these leaders have reconfigured their respective political landscapes. The relevance of this study lies in the unprecedented challenges that contemporary democracies face amid the global resurgence of populist movements. While extensive literature exists on populism as a theoretical concept, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how specific manifestations of populist leadership transform democratic institutions over time. This gap is particularly pronounced in comparative analyses that examine populist governance across different regional contexts and political systems. By investigating the parallel yet distinct trajectories of populism in Central Europe and North America, this research addresses the urgent need for empirically grounded frameworks that can help predict democratic vulnerabilities and resilience in the face of populist pressures.

Viktor Orban's Hungary represents a critical case study in the European context, where his Fidesz party has systematically reconfigured constitutional

arrangements, media landscapes, and civil society spaces since returning to power in 2010. Orban's "illiberal democracy" model offers insights into how populist leaders can transform democratic systems from within while maintaining electoral legitimacy and regional influence within the European Union framework.

Donald Trump as 45th President of USA (2017-2021) and as current 47th President of USA, provides us a complementary case studies of populism in a presidential system with stronger institutional checks and balances. His administration's approach to governance, characterized by executive assertiveness, polarizing rhetoric, and challenges to established institutional norms, presents valuable comparative material for understanding how populist leadership operates within different democratic contexts.

Through this comparative analysis, we seek to identify patterns of institutional transformation, discursive strategies, and policy implementations that characterize populist governance in established democracies. By investigating these case studies through the lens of international relations theory, this research contributes to our understanding of how populist leadership affects not only domestic political arrangements but also regional power dynamics and international institutional engagement. The implications extend beyond these specific cases to inform broader scholarly debates about democratic resilience, institutional adaptation, and the evolving relationship between populism and global governance structures in the contemporary international order.

Theoretical Framework of Populism

Due to the broad field of study encompassed by populism, scholars have developed multiple theoretical approaches to understand its nature. Benjamin Moffitt categorizes populism into four distinct approaches: ideology, strategy, discourse, and political logic. His work emphasizes the dynamic nature of populism and how it is contextually performed through these frameworks (Moffitt, 2016).

Other political scientists, such as Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, classify populism into three main approaches: ideological, strategic political, and socio-cultural approaches. This distinction highlights the varying lenses through which scholars analyze populism, focusing either on the belief systems, political behavior, or cultural patterns inherent in populist movements.

Cass Mudde, following Rovira Kaltwasser, identifies four broad approaches: ideological, folkloric, political strategy, and socioeconomic. These frameworks reflect how populism functions as both a political tool and an adaptive ideology that mobilizes people through appeals to shared identities and grievances (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

This article integrates insights primarily from the works of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, who offer an in-depth analysis of four key approaches.

Political Strategy Approach

According to Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid, the political strategy approach emphasizes populism as a strategy employed by charismatic leaders to gain and exercise power through direct, unmediated support from followers. Leaders like Trump and Orban align with this view, as both circumvent traditional political intermediaries, such as political parties or institutions, to appeal directly to the masses. This approach is especially prominent in Latin America but extends globally, particularly in the way Trump's personality-driven campaigns and Orban's consolidation of power through electoral mandates reflect a populist strategy (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

Ideational Approach

This approach views populism as a "thin-centered ideology," as articulated by Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser and Cass Mudde. It divides society into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," with populism positing that politics should reflect the general will of the people. Both Trump and Orban leverage this rhetoric, with Trump often invoking a narrative of the "forgotten man" against the elite establishment, while Orban frames his policies as representing the authentic national identity against foreign influence (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Discourse Approach

Benjamin Moffitt describes populism as a discourse that constructs a binary opposition between "the people" and "the elite." For Trump, this discourse manifests in his frequent attacks on political elites and mainstream media. Orban similarly presents the Hungarian government as the defender of national interests against the "Brussels bureaucracy" and foreign actors (Moffitt, 2016).

Socioeconomic Approach

Populism in this context, particularly relevant in Latin America, relates to economically irresponsible policies designed to temporarily satisfy popular demands, often resulting in financial crises. While not purely an economic populist, Trump's emphasis on trade protectionism and Orban's nationalist economic policies resonate with aspects of this approach (Weyland, 2019).

"Populism is a thin-centered ideology that ultimately divides society into two homogeneous and opposing camps: the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and posits that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (volonte generale) (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

Defining populism as a "thin-centered ideology" aids in understanding the often-asserted malleability of the concept. An ideology is a comprehensive set of normative ideas about human and societal nature, as well as the organization and goals of society. This implies that populism can take on very different forms, and from this perspective, populism should be understood as a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 6-7). In short, populism encompasses three fundamental concepts: the people, the elites, and the general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9).

Although theoretical approaches have been examined previously, this study also considers Benjamin Moffitt's perspectives:

- *Discourse:* This approach has recently proven popular in the literature on populism in "Europe and Latin America." It views populism as a discourse that pits "the people" against "the elite" or "oligarchy." At this point, populism is often seen as a specific style of political expression that is evident in speech or text (Moffitt, 2016, p. 30).
- *Political Logic:* This approach, cited by Moffitt in the book, conceptualizes populism as a political logic that has the greatest influence in politics and social theory, drawing on Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of populism. In a series of articles and in his book "On Populist Reason" (2005), Laclau argues that previous attempts to define populism necessarily fail because they focus on situating the ontic content of populism rather than capturing the ontological status of the concept. Populism is not just any political logic. Laclau claims that any political project is based on a division between two rival enemy groups, as outlined below. This vision is even related to the ideal vision proposed by Cass Mudde. In the aforementioned book, Laclau states:

"Populism involves a division of the social stage into two camps. This distinction presupposes the existence of certain privileged signifiers that condense the meaning of a whole enemy camp ('regime,' 'oligarchy,' 'dominant groups'; for the enemy, 'the people,' 'the nation,' 'the silent majority,' the oppressed and downtrodden)." (Laclau, n.d., p. 87).

"In Laclau's formulation, the 'people' thus becomes the subject of any renewed and effective political project, and indeed, the very essence of what is political. In this regard, if the people are the subject of politics, then populism is the "logic of politics" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 32).

Effects of Populism on Democracy

According to Cass Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, the relationship between democracy and populism creates uncertainty, skepticism, and concern in both academic and practical realms. The connection between these two terms has always been a subject of intense debate. Mudde and Kaltwasser express the issue as follows: "Although we are far from reaching a consensus, it is not an exaggeration to argue that traditional views suggest populism poses an inherent danger to democracy" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 79). The most notable recent advocate of this position is the French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, who argues that populism should be understood as a "pathology" and as a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 265).

American political scientist Benjamin Moffitt poses a crucial question in his book "The Rise of Populism": "Is populism good or bad for democracy?" Despite various opinions expressed in newspapers, editorials, academic journals, and books over the past two decades, this remains the key question that authors continually seek to answer. Moffitt notes that while some depict populism as an enemy of democracy—a view particularly prominent in contemporary European discussions, evident in the frequent handshakes of populist candidates in national and European elections—others see it as a remedy for the democratic deficits that characterize many modern political systems. In this perspective, populism is viewed as a way to restore the "people" to their rightful place as the sovereign voice of democracy (Moffitt, 2016, p. 137; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 79).

This study examines two main approaches to the relationship between populism and democracy, following Moffitt's work: those who view populism negatively and those who see it positively:

1) *Populism as a negative force for democracy*: As outlined above, arguments against populism include the notion that it constitutes a "pathology" of democracy, as defined by Rosanvallon. In this context, populism tends to be positioned as a dangerous "other" to democracy or as a resurgence of "older, more archaic forms of politics." Most of the arguments against populism trace back to the nineteenth century, associating the idea of the "people" with "uncontrollable crowds" and "mob mentality." Consequently, populism is characterized as a phenomenon to be viewed with fear and concern (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 139).

Although the approach has been particularly studied in Europe, the Latin American region should also be emphasized. There are numerous authors who have worked on populism in Latin America, especially influenced by the "political-strategic approach to populism." Here, despite the achievements of certain figures, the following perspective is offered:

> *"Orban, Gruevski, and Kaczyński have consolidated political power by weakening democratic checks and balances in their respective countries. While these leaders emphasize national sovereignty and cultural preservation, they are also seen as threats to democracy. They have abused the procedures and norms of democratic governance, deploying exclusionary rhetoric and shifting toward authoritarianism, where political opposition and civil society are constrained under increasingly centralized control"* (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1183; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 15).

Those who perceive populism as a threat to democracy face the problem that populism heavily undermines the democratic column, thereby putting liberal measures, such as the protection of minorities or checks and balances, at risk (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 141).

2) *Populism as a Positive Force for Democracy:* In this view, populism is regarded as a fundamental element of democracy due to its emphasis on popular sovereignty, its appeal to the majority, and its strong criticism of those who distort democracy. Indeed, leaders like Morales and Chavez are portrayed as heroes who have helped the poor in their countries, while figures like Grillo are seen as individuals who empower people by enhancing initiatives (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

According to Moffitt, this argument is most prominently presented in the academic literature by those who subscribe to Laclau's view of populism as a political logic. Laclau advocates for the adoption of a normative model of democracy, which he describes as "radical democracy," asserting that "radical democracy is always populist" (Laclau, n.d., p. 169) According to Laclau, "the construction of the people is

an indispensable aspect of democratic functioning" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 141). It is clear that this approach does not view populism as a pathology of democracy; rather, it sees populism as an essential feature of democracy. In this context, Laclau's support for populism is reflected in his visits to Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela at the invitation of Morales, Correa, and Chavez, respectively" (Kazin, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Similarly, there are other academics who express support for populism. For example, Michael Kazin, a historian and professor at Georgetown University, argues that populism has the potential to "*improve the common good*" in the United States, but he is also concerned about its right-wing manifestations (Moffitt, 2016, p. 142). On the other hand, a critical approach to liberalism must also be considered. In this sense, for the proponents of populism, the liberal aspect of liberal democracy is seen as going 'too far' by prioritizing the rule of law and individual rights over the democratic aspect. These criticisms view liberalism as a means to restrict democratic participation or as a way for the 'elites to maintain continuous control over the political sphere.' Populism offers a way to correct this situation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 82). In addition, scholars Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser explain that populism exploits the tensions inherent in the nature of liberal democracy, which seeks to find a harmonious balance between majority rule and minority rights. Similarly, they describe populism in theory as being 'more negative in terms of public contention for democracy and more positive in terms of political participation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 84).

For example, populism acts as a 'democratic corrective' by giving voice to voters who feel unrepresented by the elites. Populists often achieve this by politicizing issues that are not typically discussed by the elites but are deemed acceptable by the 'silent majority. This is possible when discussing the economic and political integration of marginalized sectors in contemporary Latin America. This issue has become one of the most urgent matters of the past decade, "largely due to the rise of leftist populist presidents such as Chavez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia", who have successfully politicized the dramatic levels of inequality in their countries (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 81).

Both interpretations are correct to a certain extent. Populism can function as either a threat or a corrective to democracy, depending on the electoral power and the context in which it arises. However, there are still debates surrounding both terms. In short, populism is 'primarily democratic,' but it contradicts the dominant model of liberal democracy in the contemporary world. Populism argues that nothing should restrict the '(pure) will of the people' and fundamentally rejects the

concepts of pluralism, as well as minority rights and the 'institutional guarantees' that should protect them (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4).

Comparison of Former President Donald J. Trump of the United States and Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary

The political-strategic approach emphasizes a personalistic leadership style, where power is concentrated in the hands of a charismatic figure who engages directly with the masses, bypassing institutional checks and balances. This approach is exemplified by both Trump and Orban, who have built loyal followings through direct appeals to national identity, sovereignty, and opposition to elites. Trump's strategy was rooted in rallying against the political establishment and the media, while Orban leveraged anti-EU rhetoric to present himself as the defender of Hungary's national interests (Moffitt, 2016; Weyland & Madrid, 2019). Discursive approach analyzes populism as a form of political discourse that pits "the people" against "the elite" or foreign "threats" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Trump frequently invoked the narrative of the "forgotten Americans" left behind by political elites and framed mainstream media as "the enemy of the people." Similarly, Orban has framed Hungary's national identity as being under attack by the European Union and foreign philanthropists like George Soros, portraying himself as the protector of "the people" from external influence (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018).

The rapid consolidation of executive power, systematic marginalization of institutional oversight, and punishment of perceived opponents reflect a playbook well-established in Hungary since 2010. Particularly noteworthy is the velocity with which democratic guardrails are being tested—from the wholesale dismissal of inspectors general to the unprecedented involvement of private citizens like Elon Musk in governmental restructuring. These actions represent not incremental shifts but rather structural challenges to the separation of powers doctrine fundamental to American constitutionalism. The willingness of congressional Republicans to acquiesce to these overreaches further compounds the institutional vulnerability, creating what political scientist Larry Jacobs has characterized as a "vacuum" in which traditional accountability mechanisms have been functionally neutralized.

Parallels with Hungary's democratic backsliding extend beyond institutional capture to include the weaponization of cultural rhetoric and media control - hallmarks of modern authoritarian governance. Trump's executive orders targeting diversity

initiatives and the marginalization of mainstream media in favor of sympathetic outlets mirror Orban's successful strategy of cultural entrenchment and narrative control. What distinguishes this situation from conventional political realignment is the systematic nature of these changes and their explicit orientation toward dismantling rather than reforming existing structures. As demonstrated by recent court interventions blocking certain executive actions, the judiciary currently stands as the primary institutional check against this accelerated transformation. However, the historical pattern in Hungary suggests that judicial independence itself becomes vulnerable once other democratic institutions have been sufficiently weakened. This raises profound questions about the resilience of American democratic institutions and whether the constitutional safeguards designed to prevent concentration of power remain adequate against determined efforts to circumvent them (Smith, 2025).

Methodical confrontation with academic institutions and independent media in Donald Trump's second administration bears striking procedural and ideological resemblance to Viktor Orban's established governance model in Hungary. While superficially appearing as cultural or partisan policy shifts, both leaders' approaches represent systematic attempts to dismantle institutional pluralism, a cornerstone of liberal democracy. The evidence is particularly compelling in their parallel targeting of universities: Orban's restructuring of Hungarian higher education through foundation models that installed political loyalists in governing positions and the forced relocation of Central European University mirrors Trump's current strategy of linking research funding to ideological compliance and pressuring institutions like Columbia University to modify their internal governance. These actions reflect what political scientists describe as "democratic backsliding" where democratically elected leaders gradually hollow out democratic institutions while maintaining electoral legitimacy, creating what scholar Fareed Zakaria termed "illiberal democracy." What distinguishes these governance models from conventional conservative policymaking is their explicitly transformative purpose; both leaders frame their actions not as policy adjustments but as necessary correctives to perceived institutional capture by ideological opponents they characterize as "liberal elites" or "globalists." Orban's fifteen-year consolidation of power demonstrates the potential long-term trajectory of this governance approach, suggesting Trump's accelerated implementation represents not improvisation but deliberate strategy. The Hungarian case study reveals how seemingly disparate actions-restructuring academic funding, marginalizing critical media, and deploying populist rhetoric against "enemies of the people" function as complementary components of a

comprehensive system designed to neutralize potential centers of opposition. This parallel raises profound questions about the resilience of American institutional safeguards against democratic erosion, particularly when congressional oversight mechanisms appear increasingly ineffective at constraining executive overreach legitimized through populist mandates (Jolley, 2025).

The Hungarian-American relationship under Viktor Orban represents a critical case study in how illiberal democratic regimes strategically navigate relationships with democratic superpowers while preserving their autocratic governance structures. Orban's calculated approach to the Trump administration demonstrates sophisticated diplomatic maneuvering, evidenced by Hungary's selective compliance with U.S. security priorities while maintaining its autocratic trajectory. As the text explicitly notes: "The government committed itself to higher defense spending and renewed a defense cooperation agreement with the United States. It launched a military modernization program that will jettison practically all Russian hardware." Simultaneously, Hungary "did not step back one inch from its cordial relations with Russia and China; it even rushed to offer a contract to Chinese telecoms giant Huawei to roll out the country's 5G network." This selective compliance illustrates how Orban exploited the ideological shift in U.S. foreign policy under Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell, who discontinued democracy support programs, including "a $700,000 fund established to support media freedom", based on the premise that criticism had pushed Hungary toward rival powers. Mitchell's approach effectively "mitigated the repercussions on U.S.-Hungarian relations" that would have followed Hungary's forcing the U.S. accredited Central European University out of the country, demonstrating how autocrats can successfully reframe democratic backsliding as secondary to great power competition (Hegedus, 2025).

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's reaction to potential Trump-Putin negotiations illustrates a deeper alignment between Hungary's foreign policy and broader Eurasian strategic ambitions. By characterizing the prospect of U.S.-Russia talks as "Hallelujah," Orban not only reveals ideological sympathy for Trump's geopolitical posture but also affirms Hungary's long-standing deviation from mainstream EU consensus on Russia. This endorsement reflects Orban's broader vision of an illiberal European order, where nation-states prioritize pragmatic bilateralism and sovereignty over collective European foreign policy frameworks. His optimism regarding Russia's reintegration into Europe's economic and security structures through Trump's mediation signals a desire to shift the continent's strategic trajectory—one that accommodates rather than isolates Russia. Such positioning

not only questions the efficacy of current EU sanctions and policies toward Moscow but also foregrounds Hungary's role as a geopolitical outlier within the EU (Koromi, 2025).

Authoritarian populism, as defined by Míriam Juan-Torres and colleagues, reflects a convergence of two previously distinct political phenomena: authoritarianism and populism. Traditionally, authoritarianism refers to a political system or style where executive power is centralized, opposition is suppressed, and institutional checks are weakened or dismantled (Linz, 2000). Conversely, populism is a rhetorical and ideological frame wherein a leader claims to represent "the pure people" against a "corrupt elite," irrespective of the leader's actual policies or ideological leanings (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

What distinguishes authoritarian populism as a political style is that it combines the institutional erosion and executive aggrandizement of authoritarianism with the majoritarian and anti-elite rhetorical strategies of populism. The result is a flexible, emotionally resonant style of politics capable of gaining mass appeal while simultaneously undermining liberal democratic norms (Thulin, 2025).

Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister, has emerged as the archetype of Europe's nationalist-populist movement, perfecting a model of "illiberal democracy" that has inspired right-wing leaders across the continent. His governance since 2010 represents a masterclass in democratic backsliding, executed through what political scientists call "constitutional capture" - systematically rewriting Hungary's institutional framework to entrench Fidesz's power while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018). Unlike the performative populism of leaders like Trump, Orban's approach is institutional and methodical, transforming Hungary into what he proudly calls an "illiberal state" that rejects "Western-style liberal democracy" as obsolete (The Guardian, 2014).

Like other populist leaders, Orban frames his policies in opposition to a globalist elite and positions Hungary as a defender of Christian Europe. This anti-globalization stance resonates with his base, especially as he opposes EU-mandated refugee quotas and emphasizes national sovereignty (Friedman, 2017). Orban's Fidesz party also exemplifies the strategic use of populism, functioning as a personal vehicle for his political ambitions, similar to Trump's use of the Republican Party to advance his populist agenda.

Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, has become a prominent figure in Europe's nationalist-populist movement. Since his return to power in 2010, Orban

has systematically pursued a shift toward illiberal democracy, which he openly described as a non-liberal state model designed to preserve national sovereignty and cultural identity. His governance style emphasizes executive dominance, reducing the autonomy of key democratic institutions such as the judiciary, media, and civil society. Using his party, Fidesz, as a tool for personal and political control, Orban exemplifies the political-strategic approach to populism, where a strong leader consolidates power and bypasses institutional checks through constitutional reforms (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1173).

Orban's populist rhetoric draws on nativist discourse, presenting Hungary as the last defender of Christian Europe against external threats such as the European Union and immigration. His opposition to EU refugee quotas and liberal European values has galvanized domestic support, particularly among rural and conservative voters who perceive globalization and foreign interference as existential threats (Friedman, 2017).

In line with the discursive approach to populism, Orban's speeches often frame politics as a battle between "the people" and foreign or domestic elites, be they the EU, NGOs, or liberal intellectuals (Moffitt, 2016, p. 30). Political dominance has been reinforced by constitutional engineering. Fidesz leveraged its supermajority in the Hungarian parliament to alter electoral laws, centralize media ownership, and limit judicial independence. These changes serve to entrench the ruling party's power, ensuring political control even without majority popular support.

Orban's populism operates on three interlocking levels:

Institutional Takeover: Using Fidesz's parliamentary supermajority to pack courts (reducing the Constitutional Court from 15 to 11 judges while filling vacancies with loyalists), rewrite electoral laws (gerrymandering rural districts to guarantee Fidesz victories), and neuter checks on executive power.

Information Control: Through media laws that forced over 500 outlets to consolidate under the pro-government KESMA alliance by 2018, creating what Reporters Without Borders calls "a propaganda machine" (RSF, 2020).

Civil Society Suppression: The "Stop Soros" laws (2017-2018) criminalized aid to undocumented migrants and forced NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign-supported organizations" - a tactic borrowed from Putin's Russia.

"Real Hungarians" - ethnically Hungarian, Christian, and rooted in rural traditions. His 2022 speech declaring "we are not mixed-race" exemplifies this

ethno-nationalist vision. A rotating cast of villains, including Brussels bureaucrats, George Soros (portrayed as the puppet-master of migration), and "Soros-funded" NGOs. His 2015 referendum campaign against EU refugee quotas featured billboards asking "Want migrants? Vote Brussels!" (Moffitt, 2016).

This rhetoric resonates powerfully with Hungary's rural poor and aging population, groups left behind by globalization. Orban's government fuels these fears while offering tangible rewards, like 2018's "slave law" extending overtime work hours, framed as protecting Hungarian jobs from migrant labor (Friedman, 2017). Orban's influence extends beyond Hungary. He hosts the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, attracting far-right figures like Spain's Vox leaders. His "family protection" policies (banning LGBTQ content in schools, constitutional definition of marriage as heterosexual) have become templates for Poland's Law and Justice Party and Serbia's Vučić. Yet, unlike Trump's transactional alliances, Orban builds institutional networks, like his $1.7 billion renovation of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium to train conservative European elites (Journal of Democracy, 2021).

As a result, Hungary has experienced democratic backsliding, marked by the erosion of liberal norms and an increase in delegative governance, where the leader claims to embody the will of the people directly, sidelining formal political processes (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 15). Orban's leadership reflects broader trends in populism, especially among right-wing leaders in Central and Eastern Europe. Similar to Poland's Law and Justice Party under Jarosław Kaczyński, Orban follows what scholars describe as the "illiberal playbook," in which democratic procedures are formally maintained but manipulated to restrict opposition and strengthen executive control (Perspectives on Politics, 2021). While Orban's critics argue that his rule undermines democracy, his supporters see him as defending Hungary's sovereignty against external influences and reviving national pride (Journal of Democracy, 2018).

It is quite difficult to define Trump as an absolute populist. In fact, many political scientists describe him as not only populist but also nationalist, racist, neoconservative, and even fascist. However, according to Dylan John Riley, a sociology professor at the University of California, the extreme hybridity embodied by Trump suggests that it is futile to assign him to a broad classification such as fascism, authoritarianism, or populism. "Despite exhibiting racist, nationalist, and sexist characteristics, Trump at least demonstrates the latter" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 51).

Donald Trump's populism was rooted in his performative defiance of political norms, his anti-establishment rhetoric, and his ability to frame himself as the authentic voice of the "forgotten" American people. His rejection of political correctness, globalization, and traditional political elites was not just ideological but deeply strategic, positioning him as a disruptive force against a corrupt system. His 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again" (MAGA), was a masterclass in populist mobilization, vague enough to allow diverse interpretations yet potent in its emotional appeal to voters disillusioned by economic decline, cultural shifts, and perceived elite betrayal. Trump's genius lay in his ability to weaponize resentment, transforming grievances into a unifying political identity.

A key pillar of Trump's populism was his direct, unfiltered communication style. His use of social media, particularly Twitter, allowed him to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and speak "directly to the people," reinforcing his image as an outsider battling a rigged system. This approach exemplifies what Moffitt (2016) calls the political-strategic model of populism, where leaders cultivate a personalistic bond with followers while vilifying opponents as illegitimate or corrupt. Trump's narrative framed immigrants, globalist elites, and the "fake news" media as existential threats to "real Americans," creating a Manichean worldview that simplified complex issues into a struggle between "us" (the virtuous people) and "them" (the parasitic elites). His presidency further solidified his populist credentials through relentless institutional attacks. He routinely undermined democratic norms, challenging electoral outcomes, dismissing judicial rulings as biased, and labeling critical media as "enemies of the people." This erosion of trust in institutions was not incidental but a deliberate strategy to position himself as the sole defender of the people's will. His demand for personal loyalty over institutional allegiance aligns with Weyland and Madrid's (2019) strategic populist model, where leaders prioritize personalistic authority over systemic checks and balances (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

Why is it so difficult to define populism? One possible answer is that populism is a "thin ideology"—it does not offer a comprehensive socio-economic program but instead builds on a moralistic dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Unlike fascism or socialism, which prescribe specific political and economic orders, populism is parasitic, attaching itself to other ideologies (nationalism, socialism, etc.) while maintaining its core antagonistic rhetoric. Trump's populism was ideologically fluid, sometimes nativist, sometimes economically protectionist—but always centered on the claim that he alone could restore power to "the people."

While Trump's populism energized a significant portion of the electorate, it also exposed the limits of populism in entrenched democracies. Unlike Viktor Orban, who systematically dismantled Hungary's democratic institutions, Trump faced robust resistance from courts, the press, and bipartisan political actors (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1175). His failure to overturn the 2020 election underscored the resilience of American institutions, illustrating how strong democracies can contain populist excesses (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

A second lens through which to analyze Trump's populism is the discursive-ideological approach. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, populism constructs society as a binary struggle between the "true people" and "self-serving elites," claiming that politics should reflect the "general will" of the masses. Trump epitomized this framing—his rhetoric was saturated with appeals to "the people" while demonizing Washington insiders, corporate media, and globalist elites. His pledge to "drain the swamp" was not just a campaign slogan but a foundational populist promise to purge the system of its corrupt gatekeepers (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Linguistic analysis of Trump's speeches reveals his mastery of populist discourse. A study by Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that Trump's rhetoric was uniquely effective in its simplicity, repetition, and divisive framing—frequently employing "us vs. them" language, invoking external threats (immigrants, China), and attacking elites in accusatory terms. His 2016 Republican National Convention speech and inaugural address were particularly telling. Gonzalez and Del Fresno (2018) note that Trump's use of possessive pronouns ("our country," "your voice") fostered a collective identity among his supporters, reinforcing the idea that he alone represented their interests. Phrases like "I am your voice" or "I stand with you" positioned him as a messianic figure—a tribune of the people against a hostile establishment (Barbera Gonzalez & del Fresno, 2019).

Trump's self-presentation as a "benevolent strongman"—a leader who would act for the people rather than empower them—further illustrates his populist style. Political scientist Pippa Norris observed that Trump's rhetoric often framed him as a singular savior, declaring, "I alone can fix it" (Friendman, 2017). This paternalistic populism reinforced dependency on his leadership rather than fostering grassroots political agency.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand why populist leaders like Viktor Orban and Donald Trump, despite employing similar strategies, produced starkly different political outcomes. The findings reveal that while both leaders relied on anti-elite rhetoric and institutional attacks, their impacts were ultimately determined by the strength or weakness of their respective democratic systems. Orban's success in transforming Hungary into an illiberal democracy contrasts sharply with Trump's inability to fully reshape American governance, highlighting the critical role of institutional resilience in curbing populism's excesses.

The key variable explaining this divergence is institutional permeability. Hungary's post-communist democracy, with its centralized power structure and flexible constitution, allowed Orban to exploit procedural loopholes. His Fidesz party used its supermajority to pack courts, rewrite electoral laws, and muzzle the press, systematically disabling checks on executive authority. In contrast, the U.S. system's robust safeguards—an independent judiciary, federalism, and a free press functioned as firewalls against Trump's norm-breaking. This structural mismatch explains why Orban could institutionalize populism, while Trump's influence remained more rhetorical than systemic.

Orban vilified Brussels bureaucrats and George Soros; Trump railed against the deep state and fake news. Yet their structural impacts diverged sharply. Orban's rhetoric translated into lasting policy changes, such as constitutional amendments banning same-sex adoption. Trump's proposals, like his travel bans or border wall, were frequently blocked or diluted by institutional pushback. This contrast underscores Mudde's observation that populism's "thin ideology" allows it to adapt to local conditions, producing either democratic erosion or gridlock depending on context.

These cases refine our understanding of populism's threat. First, they demonstrate that populism serves as a stress test for democracies. Second, Orban's illiberal playbook succeeds where constitutions lack safeguards like independent electoral commissions. Third, time in power matters Orban's 14-year tenure enabled entrenchment, whereas Trump's single term limited institutional damage. For policymakers, the lessons are clear: defending democracy requires hardening institutions, preserving media pluralism, and shielding civil society from state repression.

Ultimately, Orban and Trump prove that populism's danger lies not in its rhetoric but in the vulnerabilities, it exploits. As populism evolves globally, this institutional lens remains essential for diagnosing risks and crafting defenses.

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