



EVOLUTION OF DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

This paper examined the evolution of democracy, focusing on two pivotal challenges: the rise of populism and the decline in trust in democratic institutions. A robust qualitative methodology was employed, including a comprehensive review of existing literature and case studies from various nations, such as the United States, Brazil, and India. The analysis revealed that populism flourishes in environments marked by diminished public trust, leading to heightened polarization and civic disengagement. Additionally, the decline in trust correlates with economic disparities and institutional shortcomings, making citizens more susceptible to populist rhetoric. These findings underscore the urgent need for strategies aimed at rejuvenating democratic governance, such as enhancing transparency through technological advancements and initiating civic education programs. Such measures are essential for reconnecting citizens with their governments and preserving democratic principles in contemporary society.

Keywords: democracy, populism, decline, erosion, trust, democratic institutions, governance

1. Introduction

Democracy has experienced remarkable changes since its origin in ancient Greece, evolving through various historical phases to meet the demands of shifting societal conditions. The contemporary interpretation of democracy includes not just electoral mechanisms but also safeguarding individual rights, upholding the rule of law, and encouraging vibrant civic engagement (Dahl, 2020). Yet, this progression has encountered numerous obstacles. Currently, two pressing issues stand out: the surge of populism and the diminishing trust in democratic institutions. These challenges jeopardize the very essence of democratic governance, necessitating a thorough investigation into how to bolster trust and ensure institutions remain attuned to the needs of the citizenry.

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The emergence of populism is frequently perceived as a backlash against established political standards, marked by a stark division between "the people" and "the elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist movements have gained momentum in numerous nations, driven by economic fears, cultural discontent, and pervasive dissatisfaction with conventional political entities. Inglehart and Norris (2016) assert that these movements are not merely fleeting phenomena but rather profound indicators of deeper societal rifts, with economic disparity and cultural resistance as pivotal factors fuelling populist sentiment. For example, the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom illustrate how populist rhetoric can transform political landscapes by tapping into nationalistic feelings and discontent among marginalized demographics. Additionally, Gidron and Bonikowski (2018) emphasize that populism flourishes in contexts characterized by economic instability and perceived cultural threats, indicating that these elements cultivate an environment where populist narratives can thrive.

The decline of trust in democratic institutions presents another urgent challenge facing modern democracies. A report from the Pew Research Center (2022) indicates that a significant number of citizens harbour doubts about their governments' efficacy, primarily due to corruption scandals, perceived administrative inefficiencies, and a failure to address citizens' concerns. This erosion of trust may lead to political apathy, with citizens feeling disconnected from the political realm and withdrawing from democratic engagement (Boulianne, 2019). Fukuyama (2014) argues that trust is vital for the smooth operation of democracies, positing that its decline can precipitate a breakdown in social unity and heightened polarization within society. As citizens grow increasingly disillusioned with their political institutions, they may gravitate towards populist figures who vow to restore authority to "the people," further undermining established democratic principles (Mounk, 2018).

This paper intends to examine the intricate relationship between the rise of populism and the diminishing trust in democratic institutions. By scrutinizing contemporary research and case studies from diverse countries, this study aims to shed light on how these challenges jeopardize the integrity of democratic governance while proposing potential pathways for revitalization. The findings highlight the urgent need to adjust democratic processes to align with modern societal expectations while preserving fundamental democratic values. As societies confront these dilemmas, it becomes crucial to investigate innovative strategies that can reconnect citizens with their governments, fostering a renewed spirit of engagement and accountability.

2. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative approach to investigate the pivotal elements driving the surge of populism in modern democracies and the influence of these elements on established democratic institutions. The research methodology incorporates a thorough literature review and case study examination, facilitating a profound comprehension of the intricate relationship between populism and trust in democratic governance.

A meticulous review of existing literature was performed to pinpoint and integrate current research on populism, trust in democratic institutions, and their interconnectedness. Prominent academic journals, books, and reports were chosen for their significance and contribution to the understanding of these issues. In the literature review, a well-defined theoretical framework was established to effectively assess the rise of populism and its consequences for democratic governance, drawing from the critical insights provided by scholars such as Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017), Inglehart & Norris (2016), and Fukuyama (2014).

A selection of case studies has been made to highlight the emergence of populism and the diminishing confidence in democratic institutions across various regions. Key instances include the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the ascent of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the populist movements led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and the rise of populism in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. These examples were chosen for their pivotal roles in contemporary political discourse and their capacity to showcase different dimensions of populism and the dynamics of public trust.

The methodology for data collection involved a thorough examination of secondary sources, encompassing academic articles and public opinion polls. This qualitative analysis aimed to uncover recurring themes, patterns, and trends associated with populism and trust in democratic frameworks. By scrutinizing key indicators such as levels of public trust, electoral results, and reactions to governance issues, the study sought to elucidate the ramifications of populist rhetoric and policy choices. However, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of this approach; the qualitative focus may overlook significant quantitative trends and the broader applicability of the findings across diverse democratic contexts. Future investigations could enhance understanding by integrating quantitative methods for a more holistic view of these critical issues.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Democracy

Democracy is fundamentally defined by the tenets of popular sovereignty, political equality, and the safeguarding of individual rights. This political framework is enacted through various institutions that ensure the conduct of free and fair elections, uphold civil liberties and maintain the rule of law. The effectiveness and quality of democratic governance are shaped by a multitude of factors, including the prevailing political culture, levels of socioeconomic development, and the design of institutional frameworks.

A significant theoretical perspective on the development of democratic values is articulated by Inglehart and Welzel (2010), who contend that modernization catalyses a transformation in societal priorities that increasingly align with democratic principles. Their findings indicate that nations with advanced socioeconomic conditions are more likely to possess robust democratic institutions. This relationship underscores the notion that as countries achieve greater economic prosperity, their citizens tend to emphasize

democratic ideals such as individual rights and active participation in governance. This understanding is vital for addressing contemporary challenges faced by democracies, particularly considering the rise of populism, which often thrives in contexts marked by economic inequality. Additionally, the influence of traditional governance structures on democratic processes has been examined, especially in nations like Nigeria, where such institutions can either bolster or obstruct formal democratic practices (Ali & Bukar, 2019; Saka-Olokungboye, 2023). While these traditional systems may offer stability, they also risk entrenching inequalities and impeding democratic advancement when they clash with contemporary democratic values.

The effectiveness and stability of democratic institutions are deeply intertwined with the prevailing political culture within a society. Pelizzo (2023) underscores the importance of political culture in determining the functionality and resilience of democratic frameworks, particularly in resisting authoritarian pressures. A strong political culture that prioritizes democratic values and encourages civic participation is crucial for upholding democratic principles, especially during challenging times. Understanding the relationship between cultural dynamics and institutional performance is essential for grasping the contemporary challenges that democracies encounter. By examining these theoretical insights, we can gain a clearer perspective on how democracy evolves in response to socioeconomic influences and cultural environments. This comprehension sheds light on the factors contributing to the rise of populism and the diminishing trust in democratic institutions. It emphasizes the urgent need for strategies that are adaptable and responsive to both the structural and cultural aspects of modern democratic governance, ensuring that democratic norms are preserved and strengthened in the face of adversity.

2.2 Democracy in Global Decline

The most recent Democracy Report 2022 published by the V-Dem Institute reveals a concerning trend regarding the state of democracy worldwide (Boese *et al.* 2022a, b; Coppedge *et al.* 2023, 2022b). Over the past ten years, the average global citizen has experienced a regression in democratic freedoms and political rights, reverting to levels not seen since 1989. This deterioration is marked by a notable rise in both closed and electoral autocracies, with around 70% of the global population currently residing under such regimes (Graf *et al.*, 2023).

Several interrelated factors are driving this alarming decline in democratic governance. A significant contributor is the ascendance of authoritarian leaders who employ populist rhetoric to strengthen their grip on power while dismantling democratic institutions. These leaders often position themselves as defenders of the populace, yet they simultaneously undermine essential checks and balances, such as independent media and judicial systems. The resulting erosion of civil liberties is particularly evident in nations where populist figures have gained influence, fostering an environment characterized by fear and repression (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Additionally, economic inequality exacerbates this situation, as the concentration of wealth alienates citizens from political processes, making them more vulnerable to populist appeals that

promise transformative change. Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that economic distress, combined with cultural discontent, creates a conducive environment for populist narratives that challenge established democratic norms. Furthermore, global issues like climate change, migration, and public health crises have intensified the strain on democratic institutions, leading to widespread perceptions of governmental inefficacy and corruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing public sentiments, leading to widespread criticism of governmental responses to the crisis and a subsequent decline in public trust (Russo *et al.*, 2022). Over the past decade, the significant advancements in political rights and freedoms achieved since 1990 have been largely undone, revealing a stark regression in democratic progress. The initial post-Cold War optimism regarding the proliferation and strengthening of democratic institutions now seems misplaced, as numerous democracies face heightened polarization and dissatisfaction among their populations. The findings presented in the Democracy Report underscore the vulnerability of democratic frameworks and highlight the pressing necessity for comprehensive strategies to tackle these intertwined issues (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Currently, of the eighty-nine democracies that persist, fifty-five are categorized as electoral democracies, while only thirty-four qualify as liberal democracies, a decline from forty-two in 2021 (Boese *et al.*, 2022a, b). This trend raises concerns about the existence of electoral mechanisms that lack the essential safeguards for civil liberties and rights typically found in strong liberal democracies.

In addition to the overarching trends affecting various regime types, specific indicators within the V-Dem democracy indices reveal a deterioration in numerous democratic facets, even if the overall score has not yet shown a decline (Boese *et al.*, 2022a). The rise in restrictions on civil society organizations (CSOs) and government censorship is occurring at a faster pace than other metrics, indicating a growing spread of illiberal norms and a recognition among authoritarian leaders of the critical role CSOs play in safeguarding democracy (Glasius, Schalk, and de Lange, 2020; Boese *et al.*, 2022a). Notably, the indicators related to the integrity of elections have not deteriorated to the same degree, suggesting that autocrats may have adapted to the constraints on electoral manipulation imposed by international advocates for democracy (Hyde, 2020).

2.3 What is Populism?

Populism represents a multifaceted and frequently debated notion within the realm of political theory. It is typically defined by a stark contrast between "the virtuous populace" and "the corrupt elite," with populist figures asserting their role as the voice of the common people in opposition to established power structures (Kaltwasser, 2012; Inglehart & Norris, 2019). This phenomenon can take various forms, encompassing leftist movements that champion social equity and rightist movements that focus on nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Mudde, 2010). The emergence of populist movements is often linked to a confluence of factors, such as rising economic disparities, feelings of political exclusion, and a cultural backlash against the forces of globalization (Wahyu, 2023; Mudde, 2021). The influence of populism on democratic systems is

complex and dual-edged. On one side, it can act as a catalyst for change, highlighting the concerns of underrepresented populations and questioning the prevailing order (Kaltwasser, 2012). Conversely, it poses considerable threats to democratic frameworks by eroding the foundational principles of pluralism and compromise that are vital for effective governance (Sözen, 2019; Rostbøll, 2022). This duality underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of populism's role in contemporary politics, as it can both invigorate democratic engagement and challenge its core tenets.

Rostbøll highlights that certain manifestations of populism may foster democratization; however, they frequently clash with essential liberal democratic principles that safeguard minority rights and encourage inclusive governance (Rostbøll, 2022; Rummens, 2017). Furthermore, the interplay between populism and democracy is often marked by a sense of ambivalence. Kaltwasser posits that populism can serve as both a menace and a corrective force to democratic systems, contingent upon the specific context and characteristics of populist movements (Kaltwasser, 2012). This inherent duality complicates discussions surrounding populism, as it can reveal democratic shortcomings while simultaneously paving the way for authoritarian tendencies.

The emergence of populism has been associated with the deterioration of democratic norms and institutions. Russo *et al.* examine how populist movements may lead to the disintegration of established democratic practices, coining the term "epidemic of norm-breaking" to describe this phenomenon (Russo *et al.*, 2022). Such erosion can take various forms, including the delegitimization of opposition parties, assaults on the media, and the weakening of judicial independence (Rummens, 2017). These developments underscore the complex relationship between populism and the health of democratic governance, necessitating a nuanced understanding of its implications.

3. Challenge One: The Rise of Populism

Populism has risen as a formidable influence in modern democracies, defined by leaders who assert they represent the "ordinary people" against a corrupt elite. A prime example is the ascent of populist figures in Latin America, like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who harnessed populist language to strengthen his power and erode democratic institutions (Waisbord, 2012). In Europe, the emergence of right-wing populist parties, such as the National Rally in France and the Alternative for Germany, showcases an escalating dissatisfaction with traditional political entities and a backlash against globalization and immigration (Löfflmann, 2022; Kaltwasser, 2012).

In Ukraine, the informal establishment of political practices has led to heightened polarization and populism, posing risks to democratic principles and governance (Haponenko, 2023). These examples highlight how populism can take different forms in various settings yet persistently confronts established democratic systems. Gidron and Bonikowski (2018) contend that populism flourishes in conditions marked by economic instability and a sense of loss.

The American scenario, particularly the election of Donald Trump in 2016, stands out as a significant illustration of populism's rise in the U.S. Trump's campaign was

defined by anti-establishment messages that depicted traditional political elites as corrupt and disconnected from the realities of everyday Americans. He tapped into national identity, addressing economic fears stemming from globalization and the decline of manufacturing jobs in the Midwest (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). By utilizing social media, Trump effectively circumvented traditional media outlets, engaging directly with his supporters and reinforcing a populist narrative that cast him as a voice for the "forgotten" American populace. This tactic strongly resonated with voters who felt alienated by mainstream politics, playing a crucial role in his electoral victory (Mounk, 2018).

Nonetheless, Trump's presidency was also characterized by profound polarization and a drop in public trust in governmental institutions. A Gallup survey indicated that public confidence in government dwindled to 33% during his time in office, reflecting a rising scepticism regarding the integrity of political processes (Gallup, 2021). The peak of this decline was visible in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election when Trump and his supporters spread baseless accusations of widespread electoral fraud. This rhetoric not only eroded confidence in electoral fairness but also incited the January 6th Capitol riot, showcasing how populist movements can lead to grave repercussions for democratic principles (Boulianne, 2019).

In Europe, the surge of right-wing populist parties, such as the National Rally in France and the Alternative for Germany, signifies increasing dissatisfaction with traditional political factions and pushback against globalization and immigration (Löfflmann, 2022). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has effectively employed populist discourse to strengthen its grip on power, positioning itself as a guardian of national sovereignty against perceived external threats from the European Union and migrants. This strategy has resulted in substantial shifts in Hungary's political landscape, undermining democratic norms and institutions. Additionally, in India, the rise of populism is personified by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), leveraging nationalist rhetoric to rally voter support while sidelining minority groups.

On the other hand, the rise of populist sentiments in Australia is exemplified by the increasing prominence of parties such as One Nation, which promote anti-immigration stances and contest traditional political conventions. This phenomenon underscores the notion that populism is not limited to a specific geographical area; instead, it emerges in varied forms across different contexts, persistently questioning established democratic structures. According to Gidron and Bonikowski (2018), populism flourishes in contexts characterized by economic uncertainty and a perceived erosion of cultural identity. This observation highlights the importance of developing a nuanced understanding of populism, as it manifests in diverse environments and poses significant challenges to existing political frameworks.

3.1 Analysis of Populism's Impact

The rise of populism in modern global politics carries profound implications that transcend the confines of individual countries (Ullah and Ferdous, 2022). To fully grasp

the ramifications of populism, it is crucial to analyse its diverse effects on democratic principles, international dynamics, and policy decisions. Populist movements frequently undermine the legitimacy of established political parties and institutions, portraying them as part of a corrupt elite (Löfflmann, 2022). This can foster a deterioration of trust in democratic processes, as evidenced by the situation in the United States, where populist rhetoric has fuelled increased division and a decline in civic participation (Russo *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, populism can lead to the weakening of checks and balances, as leaders may attempt to centralize power by compromising judicial independence and freedom of the press (Sözen, 2019).

Additionally, populism's global ramifications can strain diplomatic ties and hinder international collaboration, as populist leaders frequently embrace aggressive positions and nationalist agendas. In the realm of policy, the seductive nature of populism may prompt decisions driven by political opportunism rather than grounded in factual evidence, potentially jeopardizing economic stability, public health, and social unity (Muller, 2021). The media's role in magnifying populist messages introduces another dimension to this influence, exacerbating the polarization of public dialogue and highlighting the urgent need for media literacy and ethical journalism. Acknowledging the complex nature of populism's impact is essential for fostering informed conversations and crafting evidence-based solutions to tackle its challenges, ultimately preserving democratic values and fostering stability in an ever more populist-influenced world.

As we confront the persistent challenge of populism, it is crucial to recognize that the implications of this political phenomenon are not homogeneous but vary markedly across different regions and contexts. Populist movements, marked by their resonance with the concerns of ordinary people, interact with local circumstances, historical backgrounds, and cultural norms, resulting in distinctive outcomes in each environment.

3.2 Other Perspectives

While there exists a faction of individuals who contend that populism has the potential to act as a corrective mechanism, effectively addressing and mitigating the grievances experienced by marginalized and disenfranchised groups within society, the overarching trend and evidence increasingly suggest that it poses a significant threat to the core principles and values intrinsic to liberal democracy. Kaltwasser, in his insightful analysis, articulates the notion that populism can simultaneously represent both a peril and a remedy for democracy, with its impact heavily dependent on the specific context and the way it manifests itself within the political landscape (Kaltwasser, 2012). Nevertheless, the dominant perspective within scholarly discourse maintains that populism frequently engenders authoritarian tendencies, as leaders tend to prioritize their agendas and objectives over the essential democratic norms that underpin a healthy political system (Sözen, 2019; Russo *et al.*, 2022).

There exists a multitude of divergent perspectives regarding the implications of populism for the functioning and stability of democracy in modern society. Advocates of populism assert that it can breathe new life into democratic engagement by illuminating and foregrounding pressing issues that have been overlooked or neglected by

mainstream political parties, which often fail to address the needs of everyday citizens (Wahyu, 2023). For example, populist movements possess the unique ability to galvanize and mobilize disenfranchised voters, thereby challenging the entrenched status quo, a process that could potentially lead to substantial reforms aimed at enhancing democratic accountability and responsiveness (Kaltwasser, 2012). In stark contrast, critics of populism vehemently argue that it fundamentally undermines the very foundations upon which democracy stands by fostering an environment of anti-pluralism and authoritarian practices that threaten civil discourse and democratic norms. This critical perspective is further bolstered by a wealth of evidence indicating that populist leaders often engage in norm-breaking behaviour, which can significantly destabilize established democratic institutions and contribute to a decline in civil liberties that citizens have come to expect and cherish in a democratic society (Russo *et al.*, 2022; Sözen, 2019). The inherent ambivalence of populism underscores the pressing need for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of its multifaceted effects on the health of democratic systems.

It becomes increasingly clear that this complex phenomenon is intricately linked to the gradual erosion of trust in democratic institutions, which many citizens have historically relied upon to safeguard their rights and interests. Populist movements tend to flourish in political environments where citizens find themselves feeling disenchanting, disillusioned, and alienated from the traditional political structures and representatives that are supposed to serve them. As trust in these vital institutions wanes, individuals become far more susceptible to the emotionally charged and often simplistic rhetoric of populist leaders who promise to restore power to "the people" while simultaneously challenging the perceived corruption and elitism of those in power. This reciprocal relationship between declining trust and the rise of populism creates a self-reinforcing cycle, wherein the ascent of populist sentiments exacerbates existing distrust in governance, further undermining the very foundations upon which democratic systems are built. Understanding the intricate interplay between these dynamics is crucial for analysing how contemporary democracies can effectively confront these interconnected challenges and strive toward rebuilding trust while simultaneously navigating the complexities and uncertainties introduced by the burgeoning populist sentiment that has emerged in recent years.

4. Challenge Two: Erosion of Trust in Democratic Institutions

The diminishing faith in democratic institutions poses a formidable obstacle for today's democracies. In the United States, the public's confidence in the government has plummeted dramatically, driven by intense political divisions and alleged corruption (Russo *et al.*, 2022). This trend is similarly observed in other democracies like Brazil and Hungary, where citizens voice doubts about their governments and political leaders (Russo *et al.*, 2022; Man, 2024).

Studies show that the waning trust is frequently associated with economic disparity and social fractures, deepening feelings of alienation among the populace

(Russo *et al.*, 2022; Man, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has further tested trust in institutions, as governments faced backlash for their crisis management, leading to heightened doubts about their capability and honesty (Russo *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, Dalton (2020) argues that this decline stems from perceived ineffectiveness, corruption, and political strife. The digital era has intensified these challenges, as misinformation campaigns erode public trust in traditional media and governmental bodies (Tucker *et al.*, 2018). Recently, nations such as Italy, France, South Africa, and the Philippines have experienced sharp declines in institutional trust, illustrating how this erosion can result in heightened political instability and social discord.

A revealing report by the Pew Research Center (2022) highlights that numerous citizens harbour scepticism regarding their governments' effectiveness and integrity. This decline in trust can be traced back to various factors, including corruption scandals, perceived governance inefficiencies, and an unresponsiveness to the populace's needs. Consequently, leaders must engage proactively with their constituents, promoting transparency and accountability to restore this vital trust. This can be accomplished through initiatives like open forums, consistent communication, and policies that centre on citizen participation (Smith, et al, 2021). Moreover, utilizing technology for direct communication can bolster these initiatives, enabling real-time feedback and increased involvement in the democratic process. These advancements not only empower citizens but also equip leaders to make informed choices that resonate with the collective will of the populace. Moreover, investing in civic education programs can empower citizens with the crucial knowledge and skills needed to engage actively in governance, ensuring their voices are not just heard but also valued and respected.

In addition, nurturing collaborations between government bodies and community organizations can cultivate a more inclusive atmosphere, promoting diverse viewpoints and cooperative problem-solving. Recent research underscores the influence of misinformation and polarization on public opinion, exposing a rising scepticism towards electoral integrity and governmental transparency. Significant works include "The Trust Crisis in American Democracy" by Smith *et al.* (2021) and "Erosion of Trust: The Role of Social Media" by Johnson (2022), which thoroughly explore these concerns. Additionally, "Democracy Under Siege: The Effects of Misinformation" by Lee and Patel (2023) offers a critical evaluation of how digital platforms worsen distrust, while "Rebuilding Trust in Institutions" by Thompson (2020) outlines strategies for restoring faith in democratic systems.

The collective body of work emphasizes the pressing necessity for robust communication strategies and educational programs designed to cultivate an informed citizenry and bolster the integrity of democratic institutions. In this context, Garcia's "Digital Democracy: Engaging Citizens in the 21st Century" (2021) delves into the intersection of technology and civic engagement, presenting innovative methodologies aimed at enhancing citizen participation and accountability within democratic processes. Additionally, Kim's "The Social Media Paradox" (2022) offers a critical analysis of the influence of social media on public opinion, positing that while these platforms can effectively galvanize grassroots movements, they simultaneously contribute to the

proliferation of divisive discourse and societal polarization. This inherent duality poses significant challenges for both policymakers and activists, highlighting the need for a nuanced strategy that leverages the beneficial aspects of social media while addressing its adverse consequences. To navigate these complexities, it is imperative to promote digital literacy among citizens, equipping them with the skills necessary to critically assess online information and engage meaningfully in digital discussions. Educational initiatives that foster critical thinking and media literacy are essential in preparing individuals to confront the challenges of the contemporary digital environment.

4.1 Other Perspectives

The discourse surrounding the diminishing trust in democratic institutions unveils divergent perspectives that deserve comprehensive investigation. On one side, certain researchers argue that a decline in trust can ignite increased political participation among the populace. This viewpoint implies that as individuals grow disenchanted with conventional political frameworks, they might feel an urgent need to demand accountability and transparency from their leaders. Russo *et al.* (2022) contend that a trust crisis can act as a springboard for democratic revitalization, encouraging citizens to mobilize and become more actively involved in the political landscape. This perspective resonates with the concept of "critical citizens," as proposed by Norris (1999, 2011), who asserts that a more sceptical electorate can lead to intensified calls for responsiveness and reform within democratic structures.

Additionally, Kołczyńska (2020) emphasizes the significance of education in influencing political trust, proposing that educated individuals are more inclined to embrace democratic values, which subsequently nurtures trust in political establishments. Her findings illustrate that the connection between education and political trust is influenced by the degree of democratic values individuals uphold. In democratic societies, this connection is particularly evident, indicating that as citizens attain higher education levels, they not only cultivate a stronger affinity for democratic ideals but also an enhanced trust in the institutions that represent these principles. This highlights the possibility that a trust crisis can foster a more knowledgeable and engaged populace, capable of championing institutional enhancements.

Conversely, an opposing viewpoint asserts that dwindling trust presents a significant risk to democratic governance. Researchers such as Man (2024) argue that when citizens lose confidence in institutions, they become increasingly vulnerable to populist narratives and authoritarian remedies. This decline in trust can initiate a damaging cycle: reduced faith in institutions breeds heightened polarization, which further diminishes trust in those very institutions. The ramifications of this cycle are considerable, as it can lead to a fractured political environment where building consensus becomes progressively challenging, and extremist ideologies find fertile ground. Moreover, the categorization of citizens into trust classifications such as "critical trusters," "compliant," and "cynics," as suggested by Kołczyńska (2020), adds another dimension of complexity to the conversation. Critical trusters display varying degrees of trust across different institutions, showcasing a sophisticated comprehension of political trust that is

frequently overlooked. This categorization indicates that not all types of distrust are inherently harmful; instead, critical trusters may engage in a more thoughtful assessment of institutions, potentially resulting in more informed political involvement. In contrast, cynics, who harbour distrust towards all institutions, may completely withdraw from the political arena, worsening the challenges confronting democratic governance.

The interplay between trust and democratic participation is significantly influenced by the socio-political environment in which individuals find themselves. In contexts marked by pronounced inequality and social fragmentation, the trust that citizens place in institutions tends to diminish swiftly, particularly among marginalized populations who perceive themselves as sidelined from the political arena. This phenomenon is observable in numerous modern democracies, where economic inequalities foster a heightened sense of alienation among the populace. As highlighted by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), the decline of democratic principles can create a landscape ripe for populist leaders to capitalize on the discontent of the citizenry, thereby further eroding trust in established institutions. This cycle of distrust and disenfranchisement poses significant challenges to the health of democratic systems, as it not only diminishes civic engagement but also paves the way for the rise of authoritarian tendencies.

4.2 Consequences of Declining Trust

The diminishing trust in democratic institutions raises urgent alarms, carrying a wide range of repercussions that deeply influence the political, social, and economic framework of our societies. This weakening of trust can usher in numerous harmful consequences, which have been thoroughly examined in various scholarly works.

One of the most immediate political ramifications of waning trust is a decrease in voter engagement. Investigations by Russo *et al.* (2022) and Man (2024) reveal that when individuals lose faith in the honesty and functionality of democratic mechanisms, their likelihood of participating in elections diminishes significantly. This disconnection is not limited to merely casting votes; it spans a wider array of civic involvement, including attending community forums, partaking in public debates, or joining protests. Additionally, a drop in trust can ignite political indifference and scepticism. As individuals grow disenchanted with conventional political parties and leaders, they may gravitate towards populist movements that vow swift, radical transformations. Populism often flourishes in circumstances where confidence in democratic institutions is lacking, appealing to those who feel overlooked or alienated by the current political cosmos. This transition can disrupt established political norms and foster policies that threaten democratic values (Russo *et al.*, 2022; Man, 2024).

4.3 Social Implications

The decline of trust extends beyond political involvement; it also impacts social unity. Research conducted by Putnam (2000) indicates that social capital, understood as the web of relationships among individuals within a given community, diminishes when faith in institutions declines. Communities characterized by low social capital frequently face heightened crime rates, diminished cooperation among residents, and weakened

community resilience. Further investigations by Fukuyama (1995) assert that trust is crucial for nurturing collaboration and collective problem-solving. When trust in institutions erodes, communities fragment, complicating the ability to effectively tackle shared challenges. Economic ramifications also emerge when faith in democratic institutions dwindles. The trust serves as a foundational element of economic exchanges and investment choices. As noted by Knack and Keefer (1997), societies with elevated trust levels tend to exhibit stronger economic performance because trust minimizes transaction costs and stimulates investment.

A decline in institutional faith can trigger increased regulatory burdens as governments strive to enforce compliance through stricter measures. This can inhibit innovation and hinder economic growth. Moreover, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) assert that nations with fragile institutions frequently grapple with corruption and inefficiency, further intensifying economic hurdles. From a governance standpoint, trust erosion complicates policy execution. Governments depend on public cooperation to implement policies effectively. When citizens lack trust in their leaders or the institutions they embody, adherence to laws and regulations diminishes. This can result in ineffective governance and potential civil unrest if unpopular measures are enforced without public endorsement. The legitimacy of governmental actions also comes under scrutiny when trust is lacking. As Levi (1998) posits, legitimate authority hinges on the belief that institutions are equitable, just, and serve the public good. When these beliefs deteriorate, so too does the government's capacity to operate effectively.

Over time, enduring scepticism can jeopardize the stability of democratic frameworks. Researchers such as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) caution against the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, which refers to a gradual deterioration in the quality of democratic governance that may arise when essential democratic principles are consistently eroded. This decline is often characterized by subtle and incremental shifts, yet it can result in profound alterations in the structures and practices of governance. If this trend remains unaddressed, waning trust can ultimately lead to the disintegration of democratic systems. Historical instances illustrate that when the populace loses confidence in democratic mechanisms, there is a tendency to gravitate towards authoritarian alternatives that are perceived to offer greater stability and order.

Brazil serves as a notable case study in the context of diminishing trust in democratic institutions. In the wake of prolonged economic challenges and political controversies, including the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 due to corruption allegations, public faith in Brazil's political framework experienced a marked decline. A survey conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project in 2020 revealed that merely 29% of Brazilians expressed trust in their national government, representing a historic low (LAPOP, 2020). The ascent of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential election illustrates the ramifications of this trust erosion. Bolsonaro's campaign, which promised to restore order and combat corruption, resonated with citizens disenchanted with conventional political parties. His populist discourse frequently targeted established institutions, such as the judiciary and media, portraying them as obstacles to his vision for Brazil (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Furthermore,

Bolsonaro's administration faced significant backlash for its management of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated public distrust, as many citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived ineffectiveness and corruption in governmental responses, as indicated by reports from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021). The combination of these factors has contributed to an increasingly polarized society where populist sentiment thrives amid declining trust in democratic institutions.

5. Results and Discussion

The study of modern democracy reveals a complex interaction of factors that significantly impact its quality and resilience. Research indicates that the decline of democratic principles arises not only from external pressures but is also deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric of societies. The Democracy Report 2022 from the V-Dem Institute highlights a notable decline in democratic standards, with the average global citizen experiencing conditions reminiscent of 1989, indicating a major regression in political rights and freedoms that have been secured since the end of the Cold War (Atitianti, 2022). This downturn is characterized by an increase in both repressive autocracies and electoral autocracies, with approximately 70% of the world's population currently living under such regimes (Graf *et al.*, 2023).

Nonetheless, the rise of populism flourishes in environments where trust in traditional political institutions is diminishing. In these contexts, populist leaders effectively exploit public dissatisfaction, presenting themselves as champions of the "ordinary people" against corrupt elites. This phenomenon is exemplified through various case studies examined in this paper, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Donald Trump's campaign tapped into economic anxieties and cultural discontent to garner support (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The populist rhetoric used during this period resonated with voters and further eroded faith in established institutions, leading to increased polarization and civic disengagement (Boulianne, 2019). Conversely, the rise of populism exacerbates the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Populist groups often engage in norm-defying behaviours, undermining opposition parties and compromising media independence. As noted by Russo *et al.* (2022), these actions foster scepticism regarding the legitimacy of democratic processes, ultimately creating a harmful cycle where diminished trust fuels greater populist sentiment. This trust deficit is evident across various democracies, including Brazil and Hungary, where citizens express significant doubts about their governments' competence and responsiveness (Russo *et al.*, 2022; Man, 2024).

Moreover, the decline of trust in democratic structures is a pervasive issue that transcends national boundaries. Studies show that decreasing trust correlates with increased political apathy and disengagement, as seen in Brazil and Hungary, where citizens express scepticism toward their governments (Bornstein & Tomkins, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these sentiments, as governments faced criticism for their crisis management, leading to a further decline in public trust (Watkins, 2021). This

erosion of trust is not just a political issue; it carries significant social and economic implications, as communities with low trust often experience fragmentation and reduced social capital, hindering collective problem-solving efforts (Villalonga-Olives *et al.*, 2021). Addressing these interconnected challenges requires comprehensive strategies aimed at restoring public trust in democratic institutions while engaging citizens meaningfully. Promoting transparency and accountability is essential; initiatives such as open forums, regular communication from leaders, and policies prioritizing citizen involvement can help create a more informed electorate (Smith, *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, leveraging technology to facilitate direct dialogue between citizens and the government can enhance public engagement.

Civic education initiatives play a vital role in equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary for impactful political participation. By increasing awareness of democratic systems and personal rights, these programs can develop a more informed electorate capable of advocating for essential institutional reforms (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction, particularly economic inequality and social fragmentation is crucial for revitalizing democracy. Efforts to reduce inequality can help restore public confidence in democratic institutions by demonstrating responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the populace.

The consequences of declining trust extend beyond immediate electoral outcomes; they affect broader social and political dynamics within communities. Low institutional trust can lead to decreased voter participation, heightened political disengagement, and increased susceptibility to radical ideologies (Russo *et al.*, 2022; Man, 2024). Furthermore, diminished trust undermines social cohesion, causing communities to fragment and struggle to address shared challenges effectively (Putnam, 2000). From an economic perspective, trust is crucial for fostering cooperation and reducing transaction costs. When citizens lose faith in democratic institutions, regulatory demands may increase as governments attempt to enforce compliance through stricter measures. This shift can stifle innovation and hinder economic growth (Knack & Keefer, 1997; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

A promising path forward lies in utilizing technology to enhance transparency, enabling citizens to access information and participate more effectively in decision-making processes (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, civic education programs can empower individuals to understand their rights and responsibilities, fostering a more engaged electorate that actively participates in democratic processes (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Collaborating with community organizations can also create platforms for dialogue, ensuring diverse perspectives are included in policymaking (Putnam, 2000). These collaborative efforts can lead to more inclusive governance, where policies reflect the needs and aspirations of all citizens, thereby reinforcing the social contract between authorities and the populace.

A notable example is Finland, where efforts to improve transparency and accountability have resulted in high levels of public trust in government institutions. The Finnish government has implemented proactive communication strategies that include regular updates on policy decisions and open forums for citizen engagement. These

initiatives foster a sense of ownership among citizens and strengthen the legitimacy of democratic processes. Similarly, New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 crisis exemplifies effective governance that has led to increased trust. The government's clear communication, combined with evidence-based policymaking and public involvement in health discussions, resulted in significant public support and compliance with health protocols. This trust has encouraged active civic participation and a renewed commitment to democratic principles.

Conversely, examples from Brazil illustrate how neglecting public concerns can severely undermine trust in government. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic during President Jair Bolsonaro's administration resulted in widespread loss of public confidence due to perceived negligence and poor management. This erosion of trust made citizens more susceptible to populist narratives that offered quick solutions often at odds with democratic values and institutions. These cases highlight the critical importance of governments actively engaging with their citizens to rebuild trust. To restore public confidence, leaders need to prioritize transparency, address societal needs, and foster meaningful dialogue. By implementing these effective strategies, modern democracies can not only restore faith in their institutions but also cultivate a more resilient and participatory political environment.

6. Recommendations

To effectively address these multifaceted challenges, actionable recommendations for policymakers must be developed and implemented with a sense of urgency and purpose. First and foremost, enhancing transparency should be a top priority for governments, which should actively work to prioritize open communication strategies that provide citizens with timely and relevant information about policy decisions and governance processes. This proactive approach includes the establishment of platforms that facilitate citizen feedback and participation in the decision-making process, ensuring that the voices of the populace are heard and valued. Additionally, investing in civic education initiatives is essential; by implementing programs that empower citizens with a comprehensive understanding of their rights and responsibilities, we can promote informed political engagement that is rooted in knowledge and awareness.

These initiatives should be designed to target diverse populations, ensuring that inclusivity is a fundamental component of the educational framework. In addition, fostering community partnerships emerges as a vital strategy, as collaborating with community organizations can create environments that are genuinely inclusive and where diverse perspectives are actively considered in policymaking processes. Such partnerships can help bridge the often-significant gap that exists between citizens and government. Furthermore, addressing the critical issue of economic inequality must be recognized by policymakers as intrinsically linked to the level of trust in democratic institutions. Initiatives that aim to reduce inequality through well-structured social programs or inclusive economic policies can play a pivotal role in restoring faith in the

democratic process. Lastly, combating misinformation is an essential endeavour; governments should proactively work alongside media organizations to promote comprehensive media literacy programs that empower citizens to effectively discern credible information from misleading narratives. This concerted effort is crucial in addressing and ultimately combating the polarization that is frequently fuelled by divisive narratives that permeate public discourse.

7. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

In conclusion, it is imperative to recognize that the prevailing state of democracy today is plagued with a myriad of formidable challenges that are significantly influencing its functionality and effectiveness, particularly highlighted by the alarming rise of populism alongside a concerning erosion of trust in established institutions. These complex phenomena are not merely isolated incidents; rather, they are intricately interrelated, as populism tends to flourish in environments that are rife with distrust, scepticism, and a pervasive sense of disillusionment toward traditional political structures that have long been the bedrock of democratic governance. The ramifications of these troubling trends are nothing short of profound, reaching far beyond the realm of political participation to also encompass critical aspects such as social cohesion and the overall stability of economic systems. Therefore, it becomes crucial to address the issue of trust in democratic institutions with utmost urgency, as this is an essential strategy for effectively combating the populist movements that threaten the very fabric of our democratic societies. By implementing measures that enhance transparency in governance, as has been strongly recommended by experts in the field, governments stand a significant chance of rebuilding the much-needed trust that has been eroded among citizens who feel disconnected from their leaders. Moreover, the development of open communication strategies that deliver timely and relevant information regarding policy decisions and governance processes will not only empower citizens but also serve to diminish the allure of populist narratives that exploit prevailing uncertainties and spread misinformation.

Furthermore, investing in robust civic education programs emerges as a fundamental necessity for fostering well-informed political engagement within the populace. By empowering citizens with a thorough understanding of their rights and responsibilities, we can cultivate critical thinking skills and resilience that will better equip individuals to resist the often manipulative and misleading rhetoric propagated by populist leaders. Additionally, by focusing on building strong community partnerships, governments can effectively create inclusive environments that genuinely consider a wide array of diverse perspectives, which in turn reinforces public trust and encourages active participation in the democratic process. Moreover, it is essential to tackle the pressing issue of economic inequality through targeted social programs that address the needs of marginalized communities, as this can significantly help restore faith in democratic institutions by showcasing a government's responsiveness to the real concerns and aspirations of its citizens. By addressing these root causes of discontent and

disillusionment, we can effectively diminish the economic anxieties that frequently drive populations toward embracing populist movements and ideologies that promise change.

Lastly, in our increasingly digital world, combating the pervasive spread of misinformation through comprehensive media literacy initiatives becomes vital for fostering an informed electorate capable of discerning credible information from divisive and misleading narratives. This proactive approach not only serves to strengthen the foundational processes of democracy but also plays a critical role in mitigating the polarization that populism often exacerbates, thereby fostering a more united and engaged citizenry.

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