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Populism and democratic decline: Modi and Trump in comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

The given article provides a comparative research of two iconic examples Donald Trump in the United States and Narendra Modi in India that discusses the matter of democratic regression in both instances as being caused due to the populist style of leadership adopted by these leaders. In equally recent development, with Trump likely to be reelected in 2024 (Trump 2.0) and backsliding in executive overreach and Modi in India winning a third term in 2024 in the backlash of more Hindu nationalist rhetoric and centralization of institutions, this paper assesses the erosion of democratic traditions by both leaders as well as the breaching of checks and balances, and fostering of illiberal political cultures. The policies of a second term proposed by Trump, namely, repetitive assaults on the media, anti-immigration laws, and amplified protectionism in trade, are contrasted to those of Modi, who is targeting criticism, undermining the Indian judicial system, and increasing the limits on the civil society. The article ends by considering that the similarity of their populist agenda points to a larger international development of illiberal democracy that is raising alarming issues to constitutionalism, plurality, and international instruments of democratic conduct.



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Introduction

The emergence of populist movements and leaders in the modern world political arena of the past few years presented citizens of the world with the image of a politician in the form of the guarantor of the will of the people, discarding, one after the other, one of the pillars of democratic society. Anti-elitist rhetoric, majoritarianism and personalist leadership are all the aspects of populism that have become an avenue to undermine democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Some of the most prominent personalities in this populist wave are Donald Trump of the United States and Narendra Modi of India leaders of two of the largest democracies in the world, who have adopted populist policies to become ultra-strong, disempower the opposition, and undermine institutional controls.

Democratic backsliding describes the process of deteriorations of democracy deriving through democratic governments compromising norms, civil liberties and independent institutions without authoritarianism (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Examples of this have been put up by Trump and Modi who have developed personality cuts, used divisive nationalism, and used institutions like judiciary, the media and electoral commissions as tools. Some believe Trump has once again taken office and, in 2024, plans to run again- and this time, there will be another person in charge of the presidency- popularly known as Trump 2.0- the allegations of institutional sabotage have once again been cited with the interventions of federal law enforcement, renewed attacks on the media, and a paint of protectionist trade focused on China and Mexico, respectively (Applebaum, 2025; The Atlantic, 2025). At the same time, the third consecutive victory of Modi in the elections in 2024 has established the ideological leadership of the BJP and, at the same time, contributed to the polarization of society along the lines of religion and a decrease in civil society and freedom of the press.

Although both executives act under various cultural and institutional contexts, they have a similar populace reasoning on centralizing power to the executive and disqualifying the democratic ideas of pluralism and procedural responsibility. In both situations, nationalism has been militarized, in the U.S., as America First and in India as

Hindutva, and thus facilitated policies which victimize minorities, foreigners and political opponents (Jaffrelot, 2021; Gidron & Ziblatt, 2022). In 2025, herding of trade wars by Trump, especially against China and the European Union, has been a pointer of reversal of multilateral cooperation and the liberal economic order in favor of populism distrust in world institutions (Foreign Affairs, 2025). The policies of Modi on the other hand have worked on economic self-sustenance (Atmanirbhar Bharat), and the state surveillance, and the naturalizing religious intolerance on the basis of majoritarianism.

In this article, the author takes a comparative perspective based on International Relations theory and comparative politics to examine the manner through which populism contributes to democratic backsliding. Based on the theories of Cas Mudde and Steven Levitsky and Nancy Bermeo, it analyses the manner in which both Trump and Modi destroy the very pillars of democracy, by subverting important democratic principles like judiciary independence, freedom of speech and autonomy of institutions, but retain an electoral democratic record. It holds that the two are a change to the illiberal democracy, whereby the outward processes and institutions of democracy are maintained, but its liberal substance is removed. By so doing, this paper adds to the discussion of the larger crisis of democracy in the world giving an insight on how charismatic populism not only puts current governance within various countries to test, but also questions the liberal international order (Applebaum, 2025; Bermeo, 2016).

Theoretical Framework (Expanded)

Recent resurgence of populism constitutes a multi-dimensional challenge to liberal democracy. Populism as a political phenomenon cannot be strictly categorized though it has become a trade mark of modern politics not only in consolidated democracies but also in developing democracies. Simply put, populism is a thin-centered ideology, which conceptualizes social cleavages related to the opposition between the so-called pure people and the corrupt elite (Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). It is thin-centered in that it is unable to develop policy direction except by hitching itself to more comprehensive ideologies, which might be nationalism, or

socialism or nativism. Populism is particularly perilous when it exists along with majoritarianism, as populism then subverts democratic institutions and practices, such as elections, to destroy liberalism, through disrespect to minorities, freedom of the press, independence of courts, and the rule of law.

Between them, populist leaders tend to position themselves as an embodiment of the general will of the population and outsiders, who struggle with established political elites and institutions of the so-called deep state. They avoid using the middleman institutions like political parties, media and civil society organizations since they believe that such institutions are the ones that make up the self-serving elite. This anti-institutional thrust leads to emergence of sort of personalist rule where focus of political legitimacy is shifted upon the leader rather than the system. Nancy Bermeo (2016) describes this process as democratic backsliding, that happens not as a direct democratic collapse but through the use of covert, even legalistic, weapons, e.g. by interference with the judiciary, electoral system and civil liberties. Backsliding is characterized by what Bermeo refers to as the executive aggrandizement of power whereby democratically elected leaders enlarge their mandate by the pretext of changing the law or reforming the constitution.

In this regard, according to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), generals are far less likely to overthrow democracy compared with elected leaders who slowly undermine the system bit by bit. They provide a model of recognizing autocratic moves in *How Democracies Die*; refusal to respect the democratic rules of the game, denouncement of the legitimacy of political rivals, acceptance or promotion of violence, and willingness to resort to limiting civil liberties. These characteristics are reflected in the course of Donald Trump and Narendra Modi management. Although their national backgrounds are quite different, in Canada, an already old liberal republic, and India a young multi-religious, federal democracy, there is a comparable form of undermining institutional guardrails pursued by populist strategies.

In order to comprehend global impacts of populism, it must be approached through inclusion of the insights within the scope of the International

Relations (IR) theory. Generally, liberalism means that as far as IR is concerned, democracy, institutions based on rule and multilateral cooperation are cornerstone of a healthy international order. Leaders who reinforce these ideals assist in maintaining a global construction that allows trade, peace and collaborative activities. However, populist regimes often reject these liberal values. The presidency of Trump was the most representative of this pattern as he pulled out of the Paris Climate Accord, TPP, UNESCO, and almost out of NATO. His government continuously depicted international agreements and organizations as limitations of national sovereignty and strengthened a zero-sum vision of the world that was founded on economic nationalism and unilateralism (Ikenberry, 2018). This action kills liberal institutionalism straight on, which depends on states doing each other good faith in establishing mutual area norms.

The constructivist IR theory also helps in understanding how global alignments and political identities get changed using populist discourse. Constructivists claim that material interests do not only cause international behavior, but also ideational factors such as beliefs, identities and narratives. Nationalist discourse is the power tool of populist leaders to recreate the concept of self and the other both at the national and international levels. As an example, Trump often used his anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-China rhetoric to create a group of enemies, which could be used to defend the actions of exclusion politics and trade war. Modi, however, uses his Hindutva vision to re-establish Indian nationalism on an ethnoreligious basis, usually portraying Muslims, and the secular institutions, as agents disrupting national coherence (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The two examples have similarities with identity as a mobilizing process that unifies power and disqualifies pluralism.

Moreover, the concept of populism brings anti-institutionalism in domestic rules as well as international affairs. At home, populist politicians end up criticizing the courts, as well as declaring electoral enterprises as partisan and criticizing adverse media. The same can be said about Trump repeatedly attacking the U.S. courts, inciting to have political rivals imprisoned, and refusing to accept the results of the 2020 election (threatening the same in 2024). The Modi government has

already postponed several important cases before the Constitution bench and influenced the appointment of judges several times. The suppressive laws like UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) to quell the voices have been promulgated by the Modi government. These leaders are opposed to global cooperation based on rules in manner replacing it with transactional or unilateral policies in which nationalistic interests play an impact. This declension in the international order of democracy combined with what many intellectuals refer to as the undermining of the liberal international order (LIO) that has long been anchored by rules of multilateralism and institutionalized diplomacy is the result of this pullback (Ikenberry, 2018).

However, eventually, the emergence of populist regimes has two repercussions such as domestic democratic degeneration and the fragmentation of international norms. The theoretically informed approach to focus on the populism and democratic backsliding in comparative politics and liberal IR and constructivist IR can be used in this research paper to illuminate how the systematic erosion of democratic systems in Trump and Modi is associated with their populist and backsliding democracy (Lake, 2020). They are working in different institutional frameworks, but as they are all relying in large measure on majoritarianism, identity politics and anti-institutional governance, as they are represented, this does present a picture of a wider global trend. With the ever-changing nature of populism as a transnational process, it is crucial to comprehend the ideological nature and theoretical potential it has regarding the preservation of commitment to the democratic values at both local and global arenas (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Research Questions

- In what ways have Narendra Modi and Donald Trump been using populist language and politics to belittle liberal democratic institutions in India and the United States?
- How do the Trump and Modi performances of 2024 reflect continued decline of prior trends of democratic weakening during their tenure?
- What does populism under the two leaders have on international norm, multilateralism, and liberal international order in the context of IR?
- How far are the Modi and Trump productions comparable in an international populism context and what are its most significant similarities and differences in the system of management?

Research Objectives

- To subject the theoretical and political interconnections between populism and democratic backsliding to analysis of the case of two significant populist authorities of our time - Trump and Modi.
- To study recent changes (their reelection/resurgence to power in 2024 in particular) and gauge how their re-authorization has been exacerbating anti-institutional politics, polarization over ethnic make-up and authoritarianism.
- To put the theory of International Relations into action, in this case liberal institutionalism and constructivism, to understand how populist regimes are undermining global democracy, multilateral diplomacy, and rules-based international order.
- To add to the literature of comparative political studies in the drawing of the attention to the longevity and maintenance of the electoral legitimacy of populist regimes as well as the annihilation of the democratic content of regimes, and to offer some provisions of how democracies may be resisted around the world.

Historical Context: Political Trajectories of Modi & Trump

A. Narendra Modi: 2014–2024 and the 2024 Election

This was the first term of Narendra Modi who was voted into power in 2014 with the premise of delivering a transformative government and economic growth. His government went on to focus more and more on majoritarian identity politics in the next ten years, all in the name of Hindutva with the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and stretching of sedition laws and other counter terror laws to silence opposition (Chatham House, 2024).

Modi has been able to gain control of institutional levers, namely media, investigative bodies, court and the election commission, as seen by the

assessment by the scholar of India deviating from being a flawed democracy down towards electoral autocracy (Freedom House & V-Dem Institute, 2021–2024).

During the run up to key elections, investigative bodies such as the ED and Income Tax Department have allegedly focussed attention on opposition leaders with the banking account of the Congress Party having been frozen (Chatham House, 2024).

Modi won a third term in a record in the 2024 general election. However, his party has lost its majority of 303 seats to 240 and according to the mandate and being invincible, this is a setback on the political front. There were reasons suggested that this electoral defeat could act as a pressure in mainstreaming democracy that correction of authority exercised without constraint, has its own people-bound maxims (CNN, 2024).

Although the economy was growing, unemployment rates among youth were very high and inequality was on the increase thereby pushing voters back. Along the way, the issues of anti-minority rhetoric, media suppression, and federal centralization were discussed under such agendas as One Nation-One Election and electoral country-wide revisions, which could be interpreted as the centralization of BJP control in the major states of the North. Mallikarjun Kharge (INC) has referred to the eleven-year rule of Modi as authoritarian, with its centralized power being manipulated via propaganda and institutional marginalizing.

B. Donald Trump: 2016–2020, 2024 Return, and Democratic Decline

The first reign of Donald Trump (2016-2020) was a radicalizing act in terms of ideology, as the country went through a wave of populist nationalism paired with continuous vitriolic remarks by the president against the media, the judiciary and the electoral system. His denial of result of the 2020 election finally led to the Capitol attack- an event that was perceived greatly to be a menace to democracy (The Atlantic, 2025).

Back in power in 2024, commonly known as Trump 2.0, he has concentrated the executive power to such an extent. Expanded emergency powers, unilateral military orders, redirection of federal funds, interference in judicial independence, and control on immigration

enforcement have all been raised as a concern to the congressional oversight; with the critics, including Larry Diamond, attesting that the U.S. has become a liberal democracy in decline, facing political polarization, declining civil liberties, and political corrosion, similar to that seen in recent experiences in Hungary and Brazil.

Along with this, the political economy of Trump 2.0 will be characterized by unprecedented levels of corruption, and seeming fusion of personal business and state policy: the allegations are Trump has received large gifts from foreign sources, foreign-regime investments in Trump buildings, immunity votes to protect official misconduct against legal responsibility (The Guardian, 2025).

The resurgence of the original protectionist agenda of Trump in the form of trade wars with China and the EU is straight forwardly impacted by populist suspicion of international institutions, destabilizing traditional partnerships, multilateral trade regimes, and global financial system of nations that relies on dollar as the main currency (Financial Times, 2025). According to analysts, such conduct empowers the world populist leaders and can weaken the U.S soft power in foreign countries.

C. Synopsis: Parallel Trajectories of Democratic Regression

Modi and Trump have managed to be electorally legitimate, but they have developed authoritarian leanings within the previous ten years. Loss of absolute majority in the third term of Modi is the indicator of prospective electoral strength, however, the overall pattern is that of institutional strut. The second term of Trump has seen the more consolidation of power and issues to integrity in the democratic institutions.

By popularizing populist-authoritarian measures deployed among identity politics, majoritarianism, media control, and aggrandization by executives, both leaders have illustrated how such strategies can be used to destroy the liberal norms within democracies themselves. The fact that their mandates are renewed in 2024 only supports the thesis of the study as these leaders continue to reiterate populist playbooks in more powerful ways.

Institutional Erosion & Populist Tactics

1. Media Control and Disinformation

The dominance over the media is an actuality of populist administration. The term fake news was introduced by Donald Trump as a move to disgrace and legitimize critical journalism and denounce the largest publications such as The New York Times, CNN and The Washington Post. His government cancelled press passes, encouraged media executives to file suit against the press, and tried to bar media mergers that were seen as negative (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Modi government in India has enjoyed an environment of television channels and media houses that are favorable to the government, commonly known as Godi media, and that magnify Hindu nationalistic tales and stifle any dissent (Zubaan, 2022). The sale of NDTV to the Adani Group, which is believed to be favorable to the BJP, was regarded as an act of strategy to undermine the existence of an independent media (BBC, 2022). Indian officials also went once in 2023 to BBC office in Delhi after the network aired a documentary that criticized Modi about his involvement in the Gujarat 2002 riots (Al Jazeera, 2023).

2. Judiciary Weakening and Legal Manipulation

The leaders of populist parties undermine judicial independence so that they are not subjected to investigation. Trump put more than 200 federal judges and three Supreme Court justices in their place, transforming the judicial system to follow ideological positions (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). During his second term, he has tried to veto those judges that have made decisions against him and introduced bills that will restrict judicial jurisdiction on judicial processes (Diamond, 2025). The judicial appointments done by the government of Modi have also been similarly politicized by the non-transparent collegium system and other forms of legislative manipulation. Trends of a postponement or trials in favor of the state take place on high-profile cases of political dissidents, activists, and journalists. This has been the case especially since 2019 when there has been a surge in the deployment of sedition, UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) and PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) and it has been alleged that the Supreme Court is selective on which cases

to jump into.

3. Electoral and Legislative System Exploitation

In the two countries, the populist governments have used the electoral processes to concentrate power. The January 6 Capitol attack was the culmination of Trump attempts to overturn elections after losing the 2020 race by making false statements that it was fraudulent; the attempt to contest the 2024 results also indicated the ongoing disrespect of democratic rules (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The BJP government of Modi passed a law to make political financing less transparent (Electoral Bonds scheme), reshaped the rules to intervene with the process of appointment of the members of the Election Commission and also disqualified opposition MPs on frivolous grounds (e.g. Rahul Gandhi in 2023) (V-Dem Institute, 2023). These parliament sessions also constantly end early, and in 2023, all opposition MPs were suspended due to arguing over the cases of violating the procedures.

4. Nationalism, Emotion, and Manufactured Threats

Populists thrive on emotional politics. Trump had been using nativist rhetoric and created crisis surrounding public safety, immigration, and trade. He continuously positioned migrants as violent offenders and Muslims as a threat to security as a source of moral panic to justify extreme measures in the form of executive decisions (Mounk, 2018). Modi's discourse likewise fosters religious polarization, especially against Muslims. In the 2024 campaign, the BJP leadership again appealed to the concept of the population jihad, the fraudulent inclusion of Muslims in voter lists, and increased Hindu-Muslim polarization through mass religious symbolism, and the opening of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (Jaffrelot, 2024). All these emotional calls are used to polarize the society, bring existence anxiety, and place the leader as the only way out.

5. Personality Cult and Anti-Pluralism

Both Trump and Modi are hyper-personalized leaders in their populism. Trump cannot be detached in his political identity and personality, as he was strengthened in his campaign with rallies, propaganda online, and direct messages on Truth social media. His 2024 presidential

candidate was more about complaints and revenge as opposed to party values (Fukuyama, 2024). The cult of personality of Modi is also rooted in religious devotion, as he referred himself to being chosen by God in the 2024 elections (Scroll.in, 2024). His picture decorates every government program, propaganda, and brand foreign policy. These personalities of cult deem pluralism, prove illegitimacy of the counterarguments, and undermine authority of institutions.

Populism in Foreign Policy and Trade Wars

1. Trump's Economic Populism and Trade Wars

An aggressive protectionist economic policy has been revived in the second term of Donald Trump, with the tariff-levying used as an instrument both of home-political populism and of international political bargaining leverage. In 2025 he declared massive 50 percent tariff war on major imports, like copper, Brazilian goods based on political peeves that included going after Bolsonaro by Brazilians (Rugaber, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Such tariffs are a new record of ignoring post-World War II rules-based trade regulated by the WTO, provoking the legal resistance of countries, such as, Brazil, Canada, and Mexico as well as threats of retaliation (Rugaber, 2025; Guardian, 2025). The WTO went on to caution against a possible 0.2 decline in world trade in 2025 which would go up to 1.5 in case of reimposition of the hardest increases- which shows how Donald Trump is radicalizing the international trade via the populist trade policies which are destabilizing the world trading markets as well as undermining the multilateral economic processes.

Undermining the WTO and Rules-Based Order

Trump has negated the WTO guidelines by reinterpreting the national security sessions (e.g., Sections 232 and 301 of U.S. trade laws) and thus is able to interrupt with the dispute settlement procedure at WTO. His administration is also preventing the appointment of members to the WTO Appellate Body, essentially freezing the workings of the appeal mechanism and making the institution powerless since 2019 (Dupont, 2025; Keskin, 2025). This decline in the strength of institutions is an expression of populist anti-institutionalism: international regulations are

presented as devices of the elite that do not consider the national interest. Economic populism by Trump overrides multilateralism as a disgrace to the genuine American population and unilateral tariffs and tawdry dealings with foreign nations as the only proper course of action.

Modi's Foreign Policy Nationalism and Self-Reliance

The foreign policy of Narendra Modi in the Indian setting uses nationalism as a rhetoric and geopolitical aggressiveness, which is obvious in such making as abandoning the RCEP trade zone or starting the Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) project. These developments are being packaged as a take back of sovereignty and defiance against the global forces (Wikipedia, 2025). Additional events that contributed to the nationalist agenda were the 2020 clash in Galwan with China, which Modi used as an instrument to establish his purported defense of national pride by positioning Chinese expansionism as a threat to Indian civilization (Wikipedia, 2025). By practicing protectionism and advocating economic nationalism in the awareness of people, Modi shapes international cooperation as an affair which undermines Indian interests.

Framing Globalism as Betrayal of the Nation

Both rulers place the populist rhetoric into their foreign policy to establish an emotional appeal and build support inside. Trump after conducting trade agreements and multi-stage institutions portrays the betrayal of laborers and sovereignty and builds-up suspicion on globalistic affairs (Tribune, 2025; Keskin, 2025). Modi also pitches globalization in the form of integration with China or omnibus trade agreements as a threat to the security and sense of identity of Hindu India. Stories of migration, resource dependency and immigration are used to portray external interactions as the end-of-life struggle. Such populist reasoning would make them the defenders of the nation against worldwide intrigues assuring them of their right to rule at the expense of institutional and democratic responsibility

Comparative Analysis

In this section, the intersection of Donald Trump and Narendra Modi, both considering the extremist context in their respective countries, is presented, as both pursue rather similar populist-

authoritarian policies that lead to the deterioration of democracy in both states through rhetoric, dilapidating institutions, and nationalist policymaking.

1. Populist Narrative & Identity Politics

The two leaders also create a populist identity based on an exclusionary discourse of us vs. them. The populist politics of Trump that convey the theme of America First, anti-immigrant appeal, and opposition to China and high-ranking organizations appeals to a section of the American population who believe they were neglected by globalization (Mounk, 2018). In the same spirit, Hindutva-based rhetoric of Modi is based on creating a Hindu-majority nation against imagined threats of Muslim minorities, secular elites, and foreign pressures (Jaffrelot, 2021). The two texts are based on the sociocultural milieu, yet they allow legitimizing the ultra-majoritarian policies and delegitimization of pluralist institutions.

2. Undermining Institutional Checks

Both Trump and Modi employ populism to destroy institutions of democracy. The frequent claim by Trump to attack the judiciary and state electoral norms and customs—such as the inability to accept the election result of 2020—are typical of executive aggrandizement powers (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The government of Modi supported a large number of sedition, damaging communication, and anti-terrorist laws to punish opponents, postponed some crucial court decisions, and strengthened its grip on anti-corruption agencies (Choudhry, 2023). Now, this similarity highlights the extent to which populist leaders erode the checks within yet continue with the electoral legitimacy.

3. Media Control & Narrative Dominance

Leaders who control the media ecosystems have the ability to determine the national agenda. Trump describes any negative coverage as a false news and attempts to suppress the independent journalism with either legal or political means (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The same can be applied to the news network the Modi supporters run, to serve the same government propaganda—mostly also called the Godi Media one, in which even the opposing or disagreeing opinion is not only distanced out of the way but also can be even silenced (Zubaan, 2022; BBC, 2022). They are

both based on narrative dominance so as to create the reality of politics and also delegitimize other sources of authority.

4. Foreign Policy Populism

In international affairs, both leaders frame global institutions as hostile to national interests. Trump's trade wars—marked by unprecedented tariffs and WTO paralysis—

represent a clear rejection of rules-based multilateralism (Dupont, 2025; Keskin, 2025).

Modi's withdrawal from RCEP and emphasis on Atmanirbhar Bharat emphasize national self-reliance and skepticism toward regional trade agreements, positioning economic nationalism above global integration. Both portray international cooperation as betrayal to the “true nation,” reinforcing domestic populist appeal.

5. Electoral Tools & Legislative Domination

Trump and Modi have harnessed legislative and electoral mechanisms to strengthen executive control. Trump's post-2020 interventions and refusals to cede power culminated in challenges to certified election results and a direct attack on Capitol Hill (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Modi's administration, meanwhile, has enacted policy changes such as the Electoral Bonds scheme, amended commission appointment procedures, and used parliamentary dominance to limit opposition influence, ensuring tighter legislative control (V-Dem Institute, 2023; The Hindu, 2023). In both contexts, institutional manipulations allow formal democratic structures to appear intact while democratic substance weakens.

Implications for Global Democracy

Dimension	Trump (US)	Modi (India)
Identity Populism	"America First"; anti-immigrant, anti-China rhetoric	Hindu nationalism; framing Muslims as threats
Institutional Erosion	Attacks on judiciary and electoral systems	Use of sedition/UAPA laws, politicization of agencies
Media Domination	Discrediting press as "fake news"	Pro-government media control; censorship
Foreign Policy Style	Trade wars; WTO undermining	RCEP withdrawal; rhetoric of self-reliance
Electoral Strategy	Contesting election results; emergency decrees	Electoral bonds, opposition suppression

Source: *Provided by the researcher*

The emergence and entrenchment of populist strongmen such as Donald Trump and Narendra Modi have prolonged and far reaching outcomes to global norms of democracy. To start with, their leadership styles characterized by anti-institutionalism, personalism and nationalist rhetoric are a threat to the liberal democratic model that the west long asserted. The reelection of Trump in 2025 has encouraged authoritarian states because he undermined American attachment to democracy in other countries. The article by AP News (2025) stated that Trump had reduced funding to the U.S.; Agency for Global Media and he has blocked democratic training programs through the USAID, leaving the world without a single representative of democracy assistance. At the same time, a variety of multilateral organizations, such as United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and NATO have been rhetorically and financially sidelined; a stronger sign towards the rejection of global democratic cooperation (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). In India, the trend observed by Modi to centralize his executive power and regulate media, judiciary, and civil society has also contributed to the belief that winning elections is a sufficient excuse to pursue democratic regressibility over a long period. According to V-Dem (2024), India is still an electoral autocracy whereas Freedom House decreased its freedom rating due to a negative trend in press freedom as well as judicial independence.

These developments are reflected in how countries

across the world are ranked as being democratic, how norms spread through world society, and civic trust. Nations that in earlier times were motivated by the American or Indian achievements of democratic order are now witnessing peers in which illiberal and radiating leaders take power at the polls and then clean out institutional restraints of and human rights guarantees. This is evident in 2025 where world democracy is being described by Freedom House as having had a 17-year-long decline which means that even electoral democracies are no longer preserving the pluralism or civil liberties (Freedom House, 2025). This negative experience is not isolated in weak democracies anymore; it is Raj present in once powerful democratic states. Since the world is witnessing the U.S Supreme Court becoming seemingly more politicized and the Indian courts taking actions of taking long to drop verdicts on matters of material constitutional importance (Choudhry, 2023), the trust placed on judicial independence as the basis of democratic stability is being diluted all over the globe.

Additionally, the amicable loss in civic confidence is also correlated with the loss of this democracy. According to a 2025 Pew poll, more than two-thirds of Americans said that they did not trust the election system anymore as they are being manipulated by partisans and intruded by the executives (Pew Research Center, 2025). And the same trend can be seen in India, where CSDS-Lokniti surveys have shown an increase in the number of people supporting the idea of a ruler

who does not need to bother with the Parliament and elections (Chatham House, 2024). These feelings mirror the move away to participatory democracy to that of executive power demanded through nationalism appeals. The No Kings protests in 2025 in over 2,100 cities in the United States triggered by efforts to expand presidential powers, show that democratic denudation can trigger citizens action, but at a point past and frequently beyond the point of resolving many of its newly established policies (Wikipedia, 2025). In each of the two, there is the apparent maintenance of the pretense of democratic continuity with its essence wrung out by the endless processes of lawfare, media domination, and sophisticated cultural manipulation.

Its strongman model poses a challenge to democracy across countries by causing the global change towards a leader-based rather than office-based performance standard of good governance. Both Trump and Modi base their decisions on the restraining of democracy on the ground of security or cultural integrity or anti-globalist sentiments. This strengthens similar approaches in such countries as Hungary, El Salvador, and Turkey where the leaders mobilize around the legitimizing rituals of the election, and also continuously tighten their grip over authoritarian control (Washington Post, 2025). The proliferation of such strategies means a transnational populist playbook and, based on emotional appeals, demonization of elites, and sabotage institutions, this calls into question attempts in the international realm to strengthen democracy and human rights.

Lastly there is another area of erosion which is technology and digital governance. As scholar Panagopoulou (2025) writes, the combination of artificial intelligence with populist form of governance allows realizing so-called algorithmic authoritarianism when the propaganda machinery, fake news, and mass surveillance control the discourse. The impression of controlling the digital space can be seen with both Modi in India and Trump in America who both have been accused of using the digital platforms to target their political dissent and enemies and the extent to which the digital surface adds as another layer to populist authority. Corrosion of democracy values does not only come through institutions but through epistemic values, questioning truth.

Finally, the populist-authoritarian approach to politics of Trump and Modi have ruptured the world of democracy. Their strategies are a message to the world that elections may go hand in hand with repression, that pluralism is a bargaining chip, that sovereignty comes above solidarity. With effects that reverberate well beyond national borders, the impact is seen not only in the credibility of democracy as a system and the deterioration of the institutions that are supposed to guard against abuse, but also in the loss of civic trust without which a system cannot survive. Unless the adherence to democratic principles can be recovered, the populist moment may turn into the long-term paradigm of the global allegiance.

Pathways to Democratic Renewal

1. Strengthen Democratic Education & Media Literacy

Early education, as well as school to high education, plays an important role in promoting civic education that teaches citizens about the values of democracy in the capacity of producing informed citizens. In conjunction, disinformation, and echo chambers fostered by algorithms should be opposed by media literacy efforts which populists can take advantage of.

2. Protect Judicial Independence & Rule of Law

Make it clear that constitutional courts and other supervising powers are not subject to executive interference by ensuring impartial and open methods of their appointment, tenures and being accountable to the people. Impartial application of rule of law has to be upheld even to those who are in authority.

3 Reform Electoral Systems & Political Finance

Consider other electoral reforms, e.g. proportional representation or ranked-choice voting that would decrease hyper-majoritarian results. Elite capture of democracy can be reduced by transparent laws on campaign financing, and restricting anonymous political donations such as the Electoral Bonds in India.

4. Empower Civil Society & Local Governance

Grassroots movements, local governments and the NGOs serve as a cushion against central

authoritarianism. The legal or financial immunity of those taking part in civil life makes lively democracy possible outside of the elite politics.

5. Build International Coalitions to Defend Democracy

Democracies need to organize themselves through forums such as the Summit for Democracy, G7, and UN Human Rights Council to name-and-shame the violators, sanction them and assist embattled democracies either with aid, asylum, or funding to civil societies.

6. Regulate Big Tech & AI for Democratic Accountability

As authoritarian regimes increase their use of digital technology, democracies have to take strong measures to regulate AI-powered surveillance, algorithm discrimination, and political microtargeting. There should be transparency of social media platforms and security against data misuse.

7. Reclaim Inclusive Nationalism

Instead of letting patriotic storylines to be taken over by the populists, democratic forces need to explain inclusive conceptions of national identity that bring different groups of people together based on mutual appreciation of democratic principles but not exclusionary ethno-religious ideals.

Conclusion

Donald Trump and Narendra Modi: Both the men are products as well as producers of democratic backsliding in the 21st century. Their emergence displays a background of broad societal frustrations that populists such as them have been able to exploit by using exclusionary language and anti-establishment tactics, such as economic inequality, identity insecurities, and distrust of the established elites. But in addition to reflecting dissatisfaction, the two leaders have acted to speed up the corrosion of democratic norms, undermining checks and balances, deepening polarization in everyday civil discourse, and redesigning government in the form of highly centralized, personality-driven power.

Using their common application of nationalism, institutional undermining, manipulation of media, and populism in foreign policy, Trump and Modi have shown us how illiberal democracies can be supported electorally. The comparative analysis also shows that populist governments left unmonitored do not only threaten domestic democratic systems, but even the entire world liberal order. With democracy at a crossroad, it is important to know these parallel paths to preserve the resiliency of democracy and design a more democratic and representative political future.

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