

# Populism's Challenges on Party Politics and Electoral Systems—A Comparative Study of USA and European Countries

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**Abstract.** The backdrop of this research is the global resurgence of populism, which poses various challenges to the conventional practices of party politics, electoral systems and democratic principles, particularly in Western countries. The research's theme is to examine the impact and challenges of populist movements on political parties and electoral politics through two case studies of the United States and European countries respectively. It first analyzes how populism rises under a state's party politics and electoral system, then discusses how it affects and poses challenges to party politics and democratic political orders. Through the methodology of comparative analysis, the research found that plurality voting presidentialism represented by the USA encourages charismatic populism with an authoritarian tendency despite the structure of two-party politics and European countries' mixed-member parliamentary system allows populist parties to rise through split-voting but not to easily dominate as the ruling party. The conclusion is that populism's rise under universal suffrage democracy is inevitable regardless of party and electoral systems but the negative impacts can be restrained by suitable institutional designs and self-correcting mechanisms of political parties, thus including populism in democratic systems instead of viewing populism as naturally contradictory to constitutional democracy.

**Keywords:** Populism; party politics; electoral systems; comparative politics; democracy.

## 1. Introduction

When it comes to analyzing politics in the 21st century, populism is a force to be reckoned with. In the last twenty years, the rise of populism has taken place throughout continental Europe, for instance, Hungary, Austria and Poland [1]. Moreover, populism's influence has spread further across the globe, even influencing traditional democracies like the USA (Donald Trump) and the UK(UKIP), as well as relatively new democracies like India (Narendra Modi) and Turkey (Recep Erdogan), with both right- and left-wing examples. It is agreed by numerous scholars that populism has significant influence on democratic politics and political institutions.

Populism has been a contested concept since it became an object of analysis [2]. It wasn't until the 1960s that populism began to be studied by social scientists. A widely accepted definition is that populism emphasizes 'anti-establishment sentiment' [3] and the narrative of conflicts between 'We the people' and 'The political elites', characterizing the populist as the only real representative of the people. Some scholars like Jansen also define populism as a discursive and stylistic strategy for political competition practice [2], with a relatively thin ideology and a primary goal to win the election rather than genuinely carrying out ideas. Despite the differences in how different populist politicians define 'the people' based on a state's context, it's concerned by many political scientists that populism is imposing a threat to liberal democracy [4] and established political institutions as it is often built on 'charismatic authority' [5] of the populist and has a tendency of 'tyranny of the majority'[6]. In other words, not all citizens are counted as 'the people' by the populist party and populism might hurt the compromising and negotiation process between the majority and the minority in a democratic political system. Others argue that populism has a democratic essence as the nature of democracy is ruled by the people and populism can correct mistakes in representative democracy by presenting the voice of previously marginalized groups and issues neglected by political elites but are important to national politics, eventually improving the quality of democracy and political systems. However,

these causal relationships are mostly based on the theories of democracy and populism but there lack detailed case studies on how exactly populism works in real life politics in different states and its influences on specific political institutions to what extent. Previous studies focus more on voluntary issues of populist politicians like studying Donald Trump's personal characteristics in determining his political success or make analysis of the economic and social context that generates dissatisfaction and populism. However, voluntary approaches are hard to summarize and merely realizing the causes of populism is not enough in tackling the challenges to politics and society populism poses. Therefore, more institutional analysis and comparative case studies across different states and political systems are necessary to expand our understanding of populism which is more than vital in reshaping world politics in the 21st century and determining public policy and decisions making processes. It might also help build the relation between a state's institutional framework and the capacity of its liberal democracy.

This research aims to address that concern by studying the influence of populism on party politics and democratic frameworks through a comparative case study approach focusing on Donald Trump's impacts on the Republican Party alongside the ascending German populist party AfD (Alternative fuer Deutschland), which represents the typical parliamentary and proportional representation system prevalent in European countries. The study will analyze how different party, and electoral systems accelerate or hinder the rise and success of populist politicians and parties and how the rising of populism reshapes party politics and even electoral institutions. Since the USA features presidentialism and has a winner-takes-all plurality electoral rules which is largely pro two-party system while many European countries adopt parliamentary system or semi-presidential system with proportional representation voting that allows for multi-party politics. The first and second part will respectively introduce and analyze the cases of the USA and European countries, the third part comparing the differences in all causing factors and both the procedure and outcomes of populism-affected party politics. The conclusion will be focusing on the prospect of future party politics under populism wave and seek to provide a solution that best include populist parties and ideas in the democratic institutional framework, bridging the gap between political elites and the public. The research believes that by adjusting the party and electoral system, populism's threat to democracy can be minimized and institutional strength of liberal democracy can be sustained and enhanced.

## **2. The Case Study of the Us Populism and Its Relation With Party Politics**

Populist movements have several key factors as a charismatic leader, suitable political conditions and a generally egalitarian political system [7]. Donald Trump's case is a perfect illustration of the argument. Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, was considered new to politics when he first ran as a Republican for president in 2016 since he never held any public office before. He was considered anti-mainstream thus unlikely to win by political analysts, losing most of the polls to Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton but won 304 electoral votes and became the president of the United States eventually, shocking the nation and the world. Moreover, he radically reshaped the traditional Republican Party with his own ideology known as Trumpism, featuring America First, anti-elitism and conservative values. In the 2024 Republican Party presidential primary, Donald Trump won 2219 delegate votes out of 2429, securing the nomination and displaying steady dominance in the GOP. Meanwhile, his charismatic leadership and populist rhetoric aroused concerns on the authoritarian tendency of Trumpism and the ending of rational Republican values which might violate the constitutional framework of elections, posing threat to American Democracy.

Trump's supporters are typically conservatives. In 2016, he won 81% of white evangelical Christian votes [8], some of the Republican Party's bedrock supporters. He emphasized the struggle of the people against 'Washington Deep State' (corrupt political elites). His slogans 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again' target bedrock Republican supporters like white Christians unsatisfied with progressive multiculturalism, supporting a 'white backlash' and middle-class industrial workers who suffer from globalization economic policies practically, giving full play to their initiative.

However, studies on Trump often neglect one critical factor which is how he succeeded as a populist under the long standing two-party democratic politics which was believed to rule out the possibility of personal cult. The winner-take-all rule, which means whoever wins the majority votes of a state gets all the electoral votes, leaves few places for third-party or independent political forces. For instance, Ross Perot won the most popular votes of about 20 million, accounting for 18.9% of the votes as an independent presidential candidate in 1992 but failed to win even one electoral vote due to the winner-takes-all rule [9]. In fact, since 1968, no independent or third-party presidential candidate has won a state which almost ruled out the possibility of winning the presidency without the support of either major party. However, Trump successfully turned the Republican Party into Trump's party and made use of its rich resources to fuel his populist movement.

To understand Trump's impact, it's vital to analyze the Republican Party factions before and after the rise of Trump. Entering the 21st century, there are basically conservatives, moderates and libertarians inside the party. Basically, the conservatives include Christian right (evangelicals) and fiscal conservatives (small government advocates), while moderates are mainly Republicans from swing states who aren't culturally conservative but support a small government and libertarians only account for a small share [10]. Since the success of Reaganism in the 1980s, the mainstream Republican Party had followed a neoconservative narrative for years, with an interventionist foreign policy but less conservative fiscally in domestic affairs which lost appeal among Republican supporters in the 2010s. Moderate Republicans John McCain and Mitt Romney's unsuccessful campaigns in 2008 and 2012 further let bedrock Republican voters down, laying a ground for Trump's populist rise.

When Trump gained an advantage in 2016 primaries, a Never Trump movement advocated by Establishment Republicans started, mainly consisting of moderates, libertarians as well as neoconservatives, criticizing Trump as a populist. Trump didn't give in but instead called his rivals 'Republicans in Name Only' who weren't real conservatives and betrayed essential Republican values thus couldn't represent the party. He made use of supporters' disappointment towards the establishment and further expanded his influence through the 'Make America Great Again' movement, endorsing candidates that are ideologically pro-Trump in MAGA rallies throughout the nation. In return, these MAGA Republicans maintained Trump's influence in congress after he left office in 2021, carrying out Trumpism on policy making. Even the candidate for the speaker of the House needed Trump's endorsement to be accepted by the party. A popular president icon certainly benefited the party elites seeking support at the local level, even the whole party in both the presidential and congressional elections. In the other way, Trumpism resembles classical GOP values, and such a longstanding party brand adds to Trumpism's legitimacy in Republican supporters. While the establishment are marginalized, simply because they lack popular votes—the most important resource under the US's party and electoral system. According to a Monmouth University Poll in 2023 [11], over 66% of Republicans out of 521 identified themselves as supporters of the MAGA movement and Trump gained significantly more support than rivals within the party showing that Republican voters increasingly favor Trump over the party.

In conclusion, Trump made use of the practical need for reform of the GOP's strategy as the neoconservative approach was losing popular support in the 21st century and his miraculous victory in 2016 gave supporters hope of a comeback of the old great Republican Party and their ideal America. In fact, under the US's plurality electoral system with relatively clear two-party divisions, the key to winning elections lies in fully mobilizing a party's bedrock supporters and sometimes extreme populist narratives help in promoting vote ratios. Trump's case showed that his charismatic populism and the Republican Party help each other forward as eventually the voters will choose the candidate more likely to win and a deep-rooted political party provides resources for cultivating a populist's own political force. Though the US's electoral college favors two-party politics, its direct election and plurality voting encourage charismatic candidates which is conducive to populist rises making use of traditional political parties. It's alarming that such populist shifts under party politics might demolish diversity and mechanism for correcting errors inside the party, leading to an authoritarian tendency that threatens the longstanding bipartisan democracy, 147 congress Republicans refusing to

admit Trump's loss in 2020's presidential election and increasingly polarized congressional voting tendencies being examples.

### **3. The Case of the European Populism and Its Impact on Party Politics**

Germany is a typical European country adopting a parliamentary mixed-member electoral system which is pro-multiparty politics. For a long time, Germany has been a 'blank space on the map of European populism' [12] but witnessed an unprecedented populist rise in the last decade. In fact, Germany's economy remained rather stable without decline or severe sovereignty debts compared to other European countries through economic turbulence after 2008 [13], even believed by observers to benefit from European integration most. However, the Eurosceptic populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) still rapidly rose and won 94 seats, gaining 12.6% of total votes in 2017's federal election as the third-largest party. Polls even suggest AfD becoming the second largest party in 2023. It's worth analyzing how the party affected Germany's political patterns and took part in parliamentary politics and whether it posed a threat to democracy.

AfD was founded in 2013, first as a force separated from the traditional Christian Democratic Union (CDU) led by Bernd Lucke that opposed the Eurozone, questioning the monetary union as Germany lost autonomous monetary policies and had to shoulder the burden of other members' sovereignty debts [13], meanwhile it supports a single market for Europe and economic liberalism [12]. It criticized mainstream parties like CDU (center-right) and SPD for being too pro-European and centrist that leaves no alternatives as German nationalism or conservatism to German people. Due to Germany's history of Nazism, nationalism was long stigmatized and curbed by mainstream parties while the establishment had the consensus in promoting European integration which neglected popular doubts on the course of the country. Therefore, AfD argued that it's no use feeling guilty for the nation's past, but it is time for popular patriotism to come back and put Germans' interest before the European Union's interest, appealing to right-wing voters unsatisfied with CDU's weak leadership and Merkel's open attitude towards immigrants and refugees.

But AfD's electoral records didn't go smoothly. In 2013, it won 4.7% of votes, slightly missing the 5% barrier to enter the federal parliament. In 2014's European Parliament election, it was accepted into the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and earned more than 2 million national votes, expanding its influence as a Euroscepticism far-right party. At local level, AfD also made progress in seats in several states' parliaments. The party has gone further to the right from pursuing monetary autonomy to cultural issues since 2017 and secured more seats under the single-district-two-votes system. Though its vote share dropped to 10.3% in 2021's election, it became the largest party in Saxony and Thuringia, consolidating its lead in advantageous areas. However, the two mainstream parties have ruled out the possibility of including the AfD into the ruling coalition due to its far-right stances connected with Nazism and xenophobia, making the party unlikely to make further gains in the cabinet.

Under Germany's current electoral system, Bundestag (federal parliament) seats are divided into geographical constituencies and proportional representation seats, known as Mixed-Member Proportional representation. The first vote is for parliamentarians representing the voter's constituency and the second is for the political party one identifies with, and the second vote determines the seats distributed to every party passing the 5% barrier. According to Duverger's law, Germany's system favors multiparty as proportional representation gives small parties more chances of earning seats which limit the chance of one-party authoritarianism and promotes inter-party coalitions that represent the interests of all parties.

However, AfD made use of Germany's electoral system by encouraging split-voting while giving up geographical constituencies relatively since it had few local political elites with rich experience that were known to voters but it's far-right ideology catered to right-wing voters unsatisfied with CDU's soft attitude on illegal immigrants and tired of the 'more Europe is the answer' discourse. Indeed, the strategy worked as it won only 3 geographical constituencies but 91 PR seats in 2017. Meanwhile,

mainstream parties' seats distribution was affected due to the lower shares of the second vote and CDU only won 15 PR seats. With the success in 2017's election, AfD gained more resources to further cultivate local political talents, improving its performance in local-level governance in its certain bedrock districts like Saxony and Thuringia, successfully gaining 16 geographical constituencies seats in 2021, consolidating its status as an influential force in German politics, threatening the dominance of mainstream parties. However, based on data of previous two elections, relying on populist narratives will at most gain AfD about 10-15% of party votes, equal to about 85-100 seats out of more than 700 seats in Bundestag and AfD still lacks support in western Germany which is generally pro-European. At the same time, AfD's populist ideology is often characterized as Neo-Nazis or even fascism and antisemitism due to common historical memory of Germans [14], leaving poor impressions on moderate voters. In brief, AfD has benefited from proportional representation voting and greatly challenged mainstream party politics landscape featuring CDU versus SPD by absorbing right-wing votes while Germany's parliamentary system requires inter-party cooperation which means AfD has to either alter its extreme populist ideology to seek negotiations with mainstream parties or remain as an opposition party, in a way preventing radical populism from dominating Germany's future direction.

#### **4. A Comparative Discussion of Two Cases**

Through the analysis of the USA's case of Donald Trump and Germany's case of AfD, it's not difficult to find some common traits and different patterns, providing clues on populism's relation with party politics and democratic electoral systems.

An essential common trait of the two populist rising is the lack of representation of certain groups of voters' interests by traditional political forces in both countries. Christian evangelicals and traditional industrial workers in the US found the moderate mainstream Republican Party unable to combat Democrats' progressive multicultural and globalization policies that they dislike. In fact, there have been cases of a party turning from a moderate leader to a hardliner (etc. the GOP from Ford to Reagan in 1980) throughout American political history. However, under severe political polarization due to 'relative deprivation' felt by certain groups of interests being relatively neglected and marginalized, centrist views that balance the interests of society as a whole are no longer accepted and populists are almost bound to prevail in the political landscape [15]. Even under Europe's multi-party parliamentary system, former mainstream parties' supporters may turn to ideologically radical parties to express their dissatisfaction. As two essential features of democratic politics are breadth and equality [16], every citizen's vote counts under universal suffrage, making populism a byproduct of democracy which inevitably affect results of political power allocation depending on the scale of populism's foundation which changes over time.

The difference lies in the form of influence and the extent of influences on party politics and political institutions. In the US's case, due to presidentialism's constitutional framework, the president serves as the executive head and is only responsible for the majority voters, making a popular charismatic political leader very much helpful in winning elections. Meanwhile, under a two-party system, the candidate also needs to grant the party's support, balancing different factions' interests so that enormous resources can be allocated to national campaigns which cost billions of dollars, in a way limiting authoritarian tendency. However, the key factor is always the presidential election for the executive head as a zero-sum game with no possibility of power sharing, determining the nation's power distribution in the next four years. In this way, a populist can secure his dominance by showing only he can win and marginalize other factions by only endorsing his people in congressional elections, significantly affecting the whole party's election results. In brief, US's party politics serves as a correcting-mistake mechanism but once the populist crashes it, power balance will be destroyed, leading to anti-democratic outcomes.

While for European's case, it's unlikely that a populist leader will take as significant a role as in presidentialism states. Instead, the populist force is centered around the ideology of nationalism and

conservatism against European integration and multiculturalism. For instance, AfD's founding leader Bernd Lucke actually left the party two years later due to divergence of party's future direction. Nevertheless, populist parties don't rely on iconic leaders or local political elites but on radical ideologies that mainstream parties dare not uphold to absorb their party votes. Since the seats are distributed mainly based on vote shares under proportional representation, populist parties can easily rise. However, after the emerging stage for populist parties, the party still lacks majority seats to form a coalition, forcing it to compromise on some issues. For instance, Fratelli d'Italia, a far-right populist party in Italy, led a right-wing ruling coalition after becoming the majority in 2022, including itself in the institution by cooperating with some moderate parties. Under Mixed-Member parliamentary voting adopted by most European countries, a populist party can gain some say in important political issues as it represents some voters' appeals, but often not able to gain absolute majority, thus leaving places for negotiations and compromises. For AfD's case, both CDU and SPD refuse to cooperate with it but propose some right-wing policies like limiting immigration to respond to populists' concerns to win back lost votes. That's an important policy inclusion mechanism of electoral democracy which is believed to reduce polarization of populism while not completely neglecting dissatisfied people.

## 5. Conclusion

To draw the conclusion, this research respectively analyzes USA and Germany's (representing European countries) populist rises' relation with party politics and electoral systems as well as how that challenges the systems. In brief, presidentialism more often leads to charismatic populism while parliamentarism encourages rises of extreme populist parties, both reflecting anti-elitism and dissatisfaction with mainstream parties' failure of tackling certain socioeconomic issues and representing certain groups. Under modern constitutional democracy which generally features universal suffrage, populism is almost bound to have a place regardless of presidential or parliamentary democratic frameworks. Since populism reflects certain social groups' appeals and interests neglected by political elites and can be beneficial to increasing representation of democracy, optimizing public policies and correcting errors. However, charismatic populism might have an authoritarian tendency that threatens check and balance of power and populist parties might lack governance capacity and make irrational decisions, both posing challenges on party politics and electoral democracy which makes restrictions on reckless expansion of populism essential.

The research concludes that a mixed-member parliamentary voting system combining proportional representation and geographical constituencies is generally better in reducing populism's negative impacts on democracy. Examples show that populist parties, despite rising rapidly due to Euroscepticism, usually aren't able to dominate politics with extreme ideologies but seek cooperation with other parties or remain as an opposition party with a certain number of seats. Meanwhile, mainstream parties may make policy adjustments catering to populist voters to win back support, satisfying their needs within the establishment. Populist parties can also shift to integrate in mainstream party politics. While two-party politics featuring zero-sum game has the downside of polarization as winning majority votes mean everything, often fueling populism.

This research still lacks quantitative data on populism's impact on party politics and electoral systems and two typical countries' cases might not cover all the possibilities which require further probes into more institutional cases of more countries and the contradiction between the public and elected ruling elites remains an intractable challenge to liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it provides some feasibility discussions on how institutional design of electoral and party systems can help populism coexist with constitutional democracy instead of threatening it, contributing to the consolidation of a more representative and rational democracy as well as adding to its institutional efficacy.

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