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The Rise of Populism: Implications for International Stability and Global Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The early twenty first century has witnessed a global surge in populist leaders and movements, reshaping political landscapes and challenging the foundations of liberal democracy. This review synthesizes contemporary scholarship to explore the conceptual debates surrounding populism, its socio economic and cultural origins, and its consequences for domestic governance and international stability. Defined as a thin centered ideology rooted in moralized anti elitism and anti pluralism, populism gains traction in contexts marked by economic dislocation, cultural backlash, and declining trust in political institutions. Once in power, populist governments tend to undermine horizontal accountability, weaken the rule of law,

erode civil liberties, and politicize state institutions, accelerating processes of democratic backsliding. Internationally, populism fuels skepticism toward technocratic global institutions, promotes sovereignty first foreign policy agendas, and contributes to the weakening of multilateral cooperation. By linking domestic illiberalism with revisionist international behavior, populism poses a multidimensional challenge to the post 1945 rules-based order. The review concludes by identifying key research gaps, emphasizing the need for comparative institutional analysis, long term assessments of populist economic policymaking, and strategies to reconcile democratic responsiveness with liberal pluralism.

Keywords: Populism; Liberal Democracy; Democratic Backsliding; Global Governance; International Stability; Anti elitism; Anti pluralism; Globalization; Economic Inequality; Cultural Backlash; Sovereignty; Multilateralism; Technocratic Institutions; Foreign Policy Revisionism; Rule of Law; Political Polarization; Institutional Erosion; Authoritarianism; Nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptualizing the Populist Zeitgeist

The global political order in the early twenty first century has been characterized by a widespread surge in populist movements, parties, and leaders spanning continents and ideological spectra (Brubaker, 2017). This phenomenon has led scholars to conclude that contemporary politics operates within a “populist Zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004, cited in Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), where populist rhetoric increasingly dominates public and policy debates. The ubiquity and success of these movements signify more than a fleeting political trend; they represent a fundamental challenge to the foundational structures and core values of liberal democracy, particularly concerning minority rights, pluralism, and the established separation of powers (Mudde, 2021).

This review article systematically synthesizes contemporary scholarly literature to define populism, analyze its socio economic and cultural roots, and evaluate its dual implications for domestic democratic quality (Global Democracy) and the coherence of the multilateral system (International Stability). The analysis establishes that populism, while often framed as a response to perceived failures of liberal governance, acts as a potent catalyst for institutional decline both at home and abroad.

A growing consensus among political scientists favors the ideational approach to conceptualizing populism, moving past earlier definitions focused solely on leadership style or political discourse (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Within this framework, populism is understood primarily as a “thin centred ideology” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This ideology is centered on a core premise: the idea that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, specifically “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” asserting that politics should be the direct expression of the general will of this pure people (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2021).

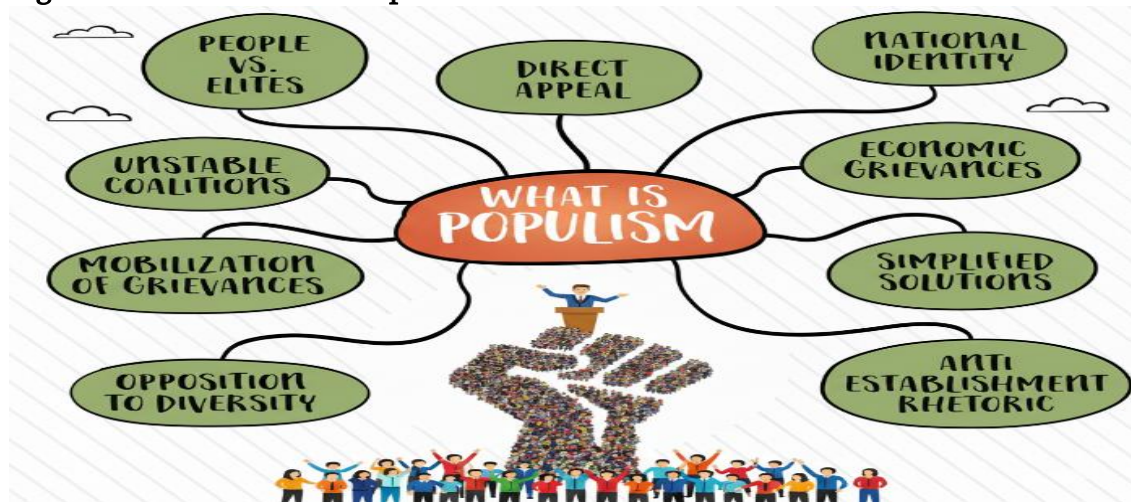
Several core elements define the populist political style (Rosanvallon, 2020; Müller, 2016). First is the claim to speak on behalf of the people in its totality, rather than merely a segment or class (Voice of the People). Second is pronounced anti elitism, which targets existing power holders, whether political, financial, or cultural (Müller, 2016). Third, populist movements typically employ binary, moralizing, all or nothing appeals in their discourse, simplifying complex policy issues into struggles between good and evil (Hawkins, 2010; Rosanvallon, 2020). Crucially, populism demonstrates a deep-seated distrust of procedures and institutions, viewing them as mechanisms used by the elite to circumvent the will of the people (Müller, 2016).

Given its "thin" nature, populism rarely operates in isolation. Instead, it combines with a "thick" host ideology, typically manifesting as some form of nationalism on the right and some form of socialism on the left (Mudde, 2021). Right wing populism, in particular, exhibits strong propensities toward building the definition of "the people" around ascriptive characteristics, which often includes religious intolerance, racism, opposition to cultural diversity, nativism, and anti immigration sentiment (Hawkins, 2010; Müller, 2016; De la Torre & Arnson, 2013). Furthermore, both variants share a skepticism toward professional expertise, scientific knowledge, and established education systems (Rosanvallon, 2020).

While the ideational approach dominates empirical studies, an important theoretical cleavage exists, particularly in the debate between the ideational framework (exemplified by Cas Mudde) and the post foundational discursive approach (associated with Ernesto Laclau) (Kim, 2022). The key difference between these two schools lies in the location they assign to populism within the broader topography of politics (Kim, 2022; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

Ideational scholars tend to attribute a moralistic particularity to populism, often leading to its pathologization as an inherently negative, illiberal response (Kim, 2022). This perspective frames populism as a threat to be managed or defeated. Conversely, the discursive approach, championed by followers of Laclau, sometimes equates populism with the political itself and emphasizes its potentially emancipatory effects, viewing it as a necessary tool for democratizing an often unresponsive political system (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). This latter view argues that the crisis of modern governance is rooted in "undemocratic liberalism," and populism provides a legitimate channel for suppressed democratic demands (Mudde, 2021). Understanding these divergent conceptualizations is vital, as they determine whether populism is analyzed as a destructive force against liberal norms or as a democratic mechanism responding to systemic failure.

Figure 1.1 Phenomena of Populism



Root Causes: The Structural Failures of Liberal Globalism

The resurgence of populism did not occur in a vacuum; scholarly consensus attributes its rise to deep structural failures within advanced industrial democracies, particularly those related to the trajectory of economic globalization and shifts in societal values (Rodrik, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). Populist messages gain traction in polarized political environments where trust in mainstream institutions and politicians is low, often because established parties have failed for too long to address real social and economic challenges (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024).

Economic Dislocation and Globalization Shocks

A significant body of literature identifies economic causes as central drivers of populism. These include persistent low growth, rising unemployment, and accelerating inequality (Rodrik, 2021). Economist Dani Rodrik (2021) has argued that the advanced stages of economic globalization produced a predictable political backlash, even if the specific political form it took was less certain.

Globalization, facilitated by technological advances and international trade agreements, lowered the cost of cross border business but also resulted in significant economic and technological shocks (Rodrik, 2021). The literature on costly factor mobility and capital reallocation suggests that the burdens of this globalization, such as job insecurity and rapid economic shifts, have not been distributed equally (Rodrik, 2021). The failure of economic policy to deliver inclusive prosperity has validated populist claims that the political and economic elites are corrupt or incompetent (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). This failure by mainstream parties to deliver inclusive growth across demographic lines converts material anxiety into generalized political alienation, validating the populist narrative that the "establishment" is working against the interests of "the people" (Müller, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024).

Cultural Anxiety and the Intermediary Role of Identity

Beyond economics, cultural anxieties play a crucial role. Populist voting is often connected to resistance against rapid changes in value systems, such as the

perceived shift toward increasingly liberal norms in Western societies (Rodrik, 2021). This cultural backlash is frequently amplified by globalization shocks, where culture acts as an intermediary variable, increasing polarization and raising the salience of latent cultural sentiments (Rodrik, 2021).

This cultural dimension fuels nativist political projects. Right wing populism, specifically, is often associated with nativism, opposition to immigration (especially from the Islamic world in Europe), and Euroscepticism (Hawkins, 2010; Müller, 2016). This results in an exclusive definition of the people based on ascriptive characteristics (Rosanvallon, 2020). In Europe, this has often translated into "welfare chauvinism," advocating for expanded welfare states that exclude undocumented immigrants from receiving government benefits (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The combination of economic vulnerability and cultural fear creates a powerful sense of wounded dignity, disrespect, and victimhood, which is effectively mobilized by populist leaders (Rosanvallon, 2020).

The structural analysis demonstrates a reinforcing causal dynamic: institutional failure, manifested by the inability of mainstream parties to deliver effective, inclusive economic policy (Rodrik, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024), leads directly to widespread low trust and political polarization (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). This environment then provides fertile ground for the highly moralizing and divisive discourse of populism to prevail (Müller, 2016). Populism is thus simultaneously a symptom of profound structural socio economic dislocation and a powerful catalyst for heightened institutional polarization.

The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy (Domestic Backsliding)

Once populist movements gain executive power, they initiate a systematic process of dismantling the liberal components of democracy, fundamentally threatening pluralism and the rule of law.

Separating Democracy from Liberalism

The defining feature of the populist threat is the effort to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism (Galston, 2018). Populists endorse popular sovereignty and majoritarian rule but are inherently skeptical of constitutionalism, the separation of powers, and protections for individual liberty and minority rights (Müller, 2016; Galston, 2018). They argue that liberal institutions, such as independent courts or media freedom, are tools used by the elite to prevent the will of the democratic majority from being realized (Galston, 2018).

This opposition is fueled by the populist claim to possess a "monopoly on virtue," presuming that the "pure people" are uniformly good and their political opponents embody moral evil (Müller, 2016). This ideological stance plunges democratic societies into an "endless series of moralized zero sum conflicts" (Müller, 2016). Compromise, which is essential for governing diverse societies, is scorned as a dishonorable concession to the forces of darkness, thus undermining democratic practice itself (Müller, 2016). Because populism's definition of the people is homogeneous, it cannot accommodate the pluralism necessary for a modern, diverse democracy (Galston, 2018).

The Erosion of Horizontal Accountability and the Rule of Law

Empirical studies consistently show the harmful effects of populist incumbents on democratic quality, particularly the erosion of civil liberties, media freedom, and horizontal accountability (Hawkins et al., 2017; Pappas, 2019). Populist governments deliberately undermine the institutional checks on executive power that are necessary for durable democracy (Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019).

The mechanism of autocratization often begins by leveraging electoral legitimacy. Populist outsiders use elections and plebiscites to gain power, but then utilize that democratic mandate to systematically weaken the very institutions designed to restrain them (Hawkins et al., 2017). This process, observed in case studies such as Hungary under Viktor Orbán, involves concentrating power in the executive, colonizing the state bureaucracy with political loyalists, and attacking independent judiciaries and constitutional courts (Müller, 2016). The consequence of these actions is significant democratic backsliding, with populist leaders statistically far more likely to cause such decline (23% of populists compared to 6% of non populist democratically elected leaders) (Pappas, 2019). Furthermore, populist leaders typically stay in office twice as long as their non populist counterparts, enabling a sustained, long term effort to dismantle liberal safeguards (Pappas, 2019). Table 1 summarizes the documented institutional mechanisms used by populist governments to erode the liberal foundations of democracy:

Table 3.1 Mechanisms of Populist Democratic Erosion

Mechanism of Erosion	Institutional Target	Consequence/Empirical Finding	Scholarly Source
Undermining Accountability	Constitutional courts, oversight bodies, regulatory agencies (Horizontal Accountability).	Concentration of executive power; significant declines in democratic quality.	(Hawkins et al., 2017; Pappas, 2019)
Attack on Free Press	Independent media, journalists, public broadcasters.	Erosion of civil liberties; tighter state control through legislation.	(Müller, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2017; Pekkanen, 2018)
Delegitimization of Opposition	Political parties, civil society, minority groups.	Moralized zero sum conflicts; systematic disadvantage for specific groups; threat to pluralism.	(Müller, 2016; Galston, 2018)
Exploitation of Majoritarianism	Electoral process, referenda.	Grants' legitimacy to leaders who then dismantle institutional checks; path to	(Hawkins et al., 2017)

Undermining Civil Liberties and the Free Press

A core focus of populist attack is the freedom of the press and civil liberties (Hawkins et al., 2017). Populist executives achieve control over information by strengthening their own media power, boosting friendly media outlets, and imposing tighter control over independent media through judicial decisions and new legislation (Pekkanen, 2018).

These calculated moves to undermine press freedom, coupled with the marginalization of groups based on ethnicity, religion, or national origin, serve as clear warnings of deeper democratic decline (Galston, 2018). These actions move beyond mere policy disputes, transforming the political conflict into a regime level threat against the rights and powers necessary for citizens to influence public decisions, effectively enabling overbearing leaders to dismantle the critical checkpoints on the road to autocracy (Müller, 2016; Galston, 2018, Arsh et al., 2025).

Implications for International Stability and Global Governance

The ideological premises that drive domestic democratic backsliding are precisely those that generate instability in the international realm. Populism challenges the post 1945 rules based order by translating its anti elite, anti procedure domestic rhetoric onto the global stage.

The Populist Backlash Against Technocratic International Institutions

Populists view international law, legal institutions, and large multilateral organizations as extensions of the "global elite" (Slaughter, 2017). They interpret the expansion of international law and the erosion of national sovereignty as a deliberate mechanism used by these elites to dominate national policymaking and benefit themselves at the expense of "the common people" (Slaughter, 2017).

This perspective highlights the inherent vulnerability of the existing international order, which relies heavily on "rule by technocracy" and public trust in elite experts (Slaughter, 2017). When domestic trust in expertise and procedures is already low (Müller, 2016), international bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the European Union (EU) become natural targets for populist criticism. The backlash has manifested in high profile political events, notably the vote in the United Kingdom to exit the European Union (Brexit), and the actions of the U.S. government under Donald Trump, which criticized NATO, NAFTA, and various UN agreements, reflecting a broader increase in isolationist sentiment (Slaughter, 2017).

Transformation of Foreign Policy Behavior

Populist ideology leads to a characteristic set of foreign policy behaviors aimed at elevating the state's status and asserting national sovereignty (Fiala et al., 2021). Populist leaders typically seek to break decisively with long established foreign policy principles and international partnerships previously adopted by the reviled "previous elites" (Fiala et al., 2021). This results in a preference for highly

transactional and flexible international engagements over deep institutional commitments (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

For instance, an analysis of the Fidesz government in Hungary (2010–2020) demonstrated how populist argumentation was explicitly used to justify revisionist foreign policy through the politicization of diplomatic machinery, confrontation with traditional allies, and the pursuit of more flexible alliances (Fiala et al., 2021). This ideological mechanism justifies abandoning multilateral commitments, promoting protectionist trade policies linked to the anti globalization backlash, and generally reasserting national interests above all else (Rodrik, 2021). Table 2 illustrates the key shifts populist governments introduce to international relations:

Table 4.1 Populist Foreign Policy Shifts and International Targets

Policy Orientation	Core Behavior	Institutional Targets & Revisionism	Scholarly Source
Anti Technocracy	Criticism of international law as a device for "global elites"; distrust of expert rule.	WTO, International Criminal Court, UN, climate treaties.	(Slaughter, 2017)
Status Elevation/Revisionism	Breaking with long established principles; prioritizing national self-interest; transactional alliances.	Confrontation with traditional allies (NATO); repudiation of free trade agreements (NAFTA).	(Fiala et al., 2021; Slaughter, 2017)
Sovereignty Reassertion	Prioritizing national control over supranational integration and pooled authority.	European Union (Brexit); questioning legal transformation from Westphalian to constitutional.	(Slaughter, 2017)

The Debate on Foreign Policy Continuity

While the ideological justification for foreign policy revisionism is strong, the degree to which populist governments consistently disrupt international stability remains a nuanced academic question (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2024). Some observers emphasize the unpredictability of populist leaders, who often combine their thin ideology with varying thick host ideologies across regions (e.g., right wing nationalism in the Global North versus left wing socialism in Latin America) (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2024).

However, the international implications of populism are not uniformly disruptive. Some studies indicate that national interests and structural geopolitical realities can override populist radicalism, resulting in a substantial degree of foreign policy continuity, even under populist leaders, such as in the case of Prime Minister

Modi's India (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2024). Nevertheless, the overarching impact remains significant, leading to a fundamental questioning of the expansion of international law and the erosion of sovereignty that characterized the post Cold War era (Slaughter, 2017). The populist reaction, particularly evidenced by the political feasibility of Brexit, fundamentally challenges the premise of institutional permanence within integrated legal regimes like the EU (Slaughter, 2017). By re-establishing the priority of national sovereignty, populism promotes a return to a more Westphalian system, where national states are jealously protective of their autonomy and continuously bargain for privileges, thus eroding the uniformity and collective strength of multilateral arrangements (Slaughter, 2017).

Synthesis: Populism as Catalyst and Symptom

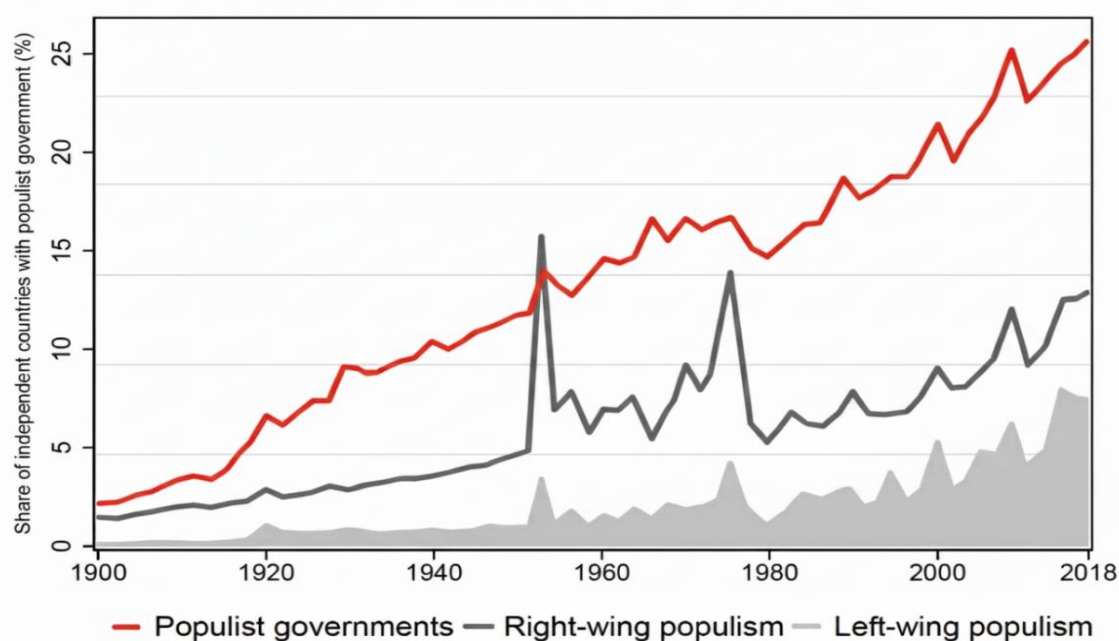
The comprehensive review of the literature necessitates a synthesis that moves beyond the simple question of whether populism is "good" or "bad." The evidence suggests populism is a dynamic force that acts both as a symptom of structural weaknesses and a catalyst for institutional decay.

Populism: Symptom of Decline or Cause of Breakdown?

Populism is fundamentally a symptom of the crisis of political representation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). It flourishes when mainstream political actors fail to solve critical socio economic problems, such as inequality stemming from globalization, leading to pervasive distrust in established institutions (Rodrik, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). Populist movements are, therefore, a radical, anti establishment response to what many perceive as an "undemocratic liberalism" where elites operate without genuine popular accountability (Mudde, 2021).

However, irrespective of its origins, the ideational core of populism transforms it into a destructive catalyst for liberal democracy. Empirical studies confirm a consistent and negative association between populist incumbency and democratic quality (Hawkins et al., 2017). The vulnerability of a democracy (e.g., low trust and high inequality) creates the necessary conditions for populist victory, but the populist ideology provides the sufficient element—the specific rhetorical and political strategy—to justify the dismantling of liberal checkpoints (Müller, 2016). By claiming a monopoly on virtue, populists weaponize structural failures to delegitimize the opposition and eliminate horizontal accountability, converting policy disputes into regime level threats and accelerating democratic backsliding (Müller, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2017).

Figure 5.1 Populists in power: Share of countries in sample



The Challenge to Pluralism

The most cohesive conclusion across the ideational and empirical analyses is that populism fundamentally threatens pluralism (Mudde, 2021; Müller, 2016). The rigid binary framework dividing society into "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" is inherently anti pluralist. Modern liberal democracy rests on the necessity of compromise among diverse groups (Müller, 2016). When populism enforces a Manichean struggle, it renders compromise impossible, systematically threatening the rights of minorities and creating conditions where diverse opinions are delegitimized and persecuted as "enemies of the people" (Galston, 2018; Müller, 2016). This attack on pluralism is the consistent factor linking domestic attacks on judicial independence to international rejection of multilateral cooperation—both are viewed as institutions that protect diversity and restrict the pure will of the mobilized majority.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The global rise of populism represents the most significant ideological challenge to the liberal international order since the Cold War (Slaughter, 2017). Defined as a thin centered ideology based on moralized anti elitism and anti pluralism, populism is rooted in the structural failures of globalization to deliver inclusive economic benefits and the corresponding crisis of political representation.

Domestically, the evidence strongly correlates populist incumbency with a systematic erosion of liberal safeguards, including media freedom, civil liberties, and horizontal accountability, often through legalistic maneuvers that concentrate power in the executive and dismantle institutional checks. Internationally, populism drives revisionist and transactional foreign policies by rejecting technocratic global institutions, which are framed as serving a corrupt international elite. This rejection

destabilizes multilateral cooperation and pushes the global system toward a nationalistic, sovereignty first orientation.

Avenues for Future Research

While substantial progress has been made, scholarly inquiry must continue to address critical gaps to fully understand this phenomenon:

1. **Comparative Institutional Analysis:** Research must move beyond narrow regional analyses, particularly those focused on the Global North, to systematically compare the effects of right and left wing populism across diverse institutional and economic contexts (Hawkins et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2024). Detailed comparative studies are needed to determine which democratic institutions prove most resilient to populist capture and which are most vulnerable to co-optation.
2. **Long Term Policy Effects:** Future research should focus on the efficacy and long term consequences of populist protectionist policies and inefficient redistribution models, moving beyond political analysis to rigorously evaluate their economic sustainability (Rodrik, 2021).
3. **Policy and Institutional Counter Strategies:** A critical research agenda must focus on developing effective institutional and policy remedies. This includes devising economic strategies centered on inclusive growth to restore well being across demographic lines (Galston, 2018). Furthermore, research should investigate methods by which liberal democrats can restore public trust in institutions and accommodate reasonable demands for national sovereignty without sacrificing the core principles of pluralism and the rule of law (Müller, 2016; Galston, 2018).

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