Transatlantic strains: the impact of trumpism on european democratic stability

Tensiones transatlánticas: el impacto del trumpismo en la estabilidad democrática europea[4]

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Resumen

El artículo evalúa el «efecto Trump» como una prueba de estrés transatlántica para la resiliencia democrática de las democracias liberales europeas. Un aspecto central de la investigación es cómo la primera y la segunda presidencia de Trump, y su persistente fenómeno, han influido en el discurso político, el comportamiento electoral y las normas institucionales europeas. Enmarcado en las teorías de la resiliencia democrática, el populismo y el contagio político, el estudio sitúa el trumpismo no solo como un episodio interno estadounidense, sino como un modelo catalizador que ha envalentonado a los actores populistas europeos, al tiempo que ha desestabilizado las salvaguardias democráticas liberales. Mediante un análisis comparativo e inter-

Abstract

The article evaluates the "Trump effect" as a transatlantic stress test on the democratic resilience of European liberal democracies. Central to the inquiry is how Trump's first and second presidencies and enduring phenomenon have influenced European political discourse, electoral behaviour, and institutional norms. Framed by theories of democratic resilience, populism, and political contagion, the study situates Trumpism not merely as a domestic American episode but as a catalytic model that has emboldened European populist actors while unsettling liberal democratic safeguards. Through comparative and interpretive analysis of key European states, including France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Italy, the article assesses how institu-

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pretativo de estados europeos clave, como Francia, Alemania, Hungría, Polonia e Italia, el artículo evalúa cómo las instituciones, la sociedad civil, los medios de comunicación y los actores políticos tradicionales han absorbido, resistido o adaptado estas presiones populistas. El estudio concluye que, si bien algunas democracias demuestran una sólida resistencia discursiva e institucional, otras muestran vulnerabilidad a la deriva iliberal. El artículo aporta una síntesis teórica original que mapea la interacción entre el populismo al estilo estadounidense y los mecanismos de afrontamiento democráticos europeos, profundizando nuestra comprensión de la resiliencia ante la presión populista en un panorama político globalizado.

Palabras clave: resiliencia democrática, efecto Trump, populismo, contagio político, democracia liberal, política transatlántica.

tions, civil society, media, and mainstream political actors have absorbed, resisted, or adapted to these populist pressures. The study finds that while some democracies demonstrate robust discursive and institutional resistance, others exhibit vulnerabilities to illiberal drift. The article contributes an original theoretical synthesis that maps the interaction between American-style populism and European democratic coping mechanisms, advancing our understanding of resilience under populist duress in a globalised political landscape.

Keywords: democratic resilience, Trump effect, populism, political contagion, liberal democracy, transatlantic politics

1. Introduction

The presidency of Donald J. Trump in the US marked a profound rupture in the norms of liberal democratic governance, not only within the US but also globally. Characterized by an abrasive political style, open disdain for multilateral institutions, and a sustained assault on democratic norms and media credibility, Trumpism challenged the assumptions underpinning the post-Cold War liberal international order (Mounk, 2018; Snyder, 2017). Trump's tenure and the populist energies he unleashed reverberated far beyond the US, raising anxiety in Europe, where echoes of illiberalism had already begun to emerge. The "Trump dilemma" for Europe lies in navigating the appeal and threat of populist authoritarianism while upholding the continent's democratic traditions and institutional integrity.

Europe is currently beset by interlocking crises that strain its democratic foundations. The protracted migration pressures have intensified identity politics and anti-immigrant sentiment, which have been exploited by far-right parties such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), France's Rassemblement National, and Italy's Lega Nord (Dennison and Geddes, 2018). Meanwhile, Russia's war in Ukraine has placed extraordinary demands on European unity, defence, and energy policies while simultaneously emboldening Eurosceptic actors questioning the efficacy of the EU project

(Leonard *et al.* 2021). Within the European Union (EU) itself, democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, exemplified by judicial capture, media control, and nationalist rhetoric, raises serious questions about the resilience of European liberal democracy from within (Kelemen, 2020; Sadurski, 2019). The transatlantic resonance of Trump's political script, suspicion of elites, media delegitimization, glorification of "the people,' and institutional brinkmanship has provided both a template and a justification for similar manoeuvres in Europe.

Trump's trade war and confrontational stance toward the EU and NATO disrupted decades of transatlantic cooperation. His tariffs and erratic diplomacy eroded trust and exposed Europe's dependence on the US. Politically, Trump's autocratic style signals long-term risks if Europe stays passive. Economically, his policies hurt EU industries and threatened global trade stability. On security, his wavering NATO support challenged Europe's reliance on US defence. Europe must now step up to protect democratic values and act as a sovereign geopolitical force.

Theoretically and normatively, the study intervenes in ongoing debates about the resilience of democratic institutions under populist stress. Resilience, in this context, is not merely the survival of electoral procedures or state structures but rather the capacity of liberal democratic systems to adapt, defend core values, and regenerate civic trust in the face of erosion. Democratic backsliding is often incremental and legalistic, making it harder to resist and easier to normalize (Bermeo, 2016). Consequently, the challenge is not only political but also deeply moral and cultural, centred on the defence of pluralism, the rule of law, free media, and civil society. The Trump era and its aftershocks in Europe thus serve as a litmus test for the health of democratic regimes in the 21st century.

2. Theoretical Framework: Populist Contagion and Democratic Resilience

The rise of populist politics in the US under Trump has transcended being merely a domestic phenomenon. Its symbolic and strategic influence has reverberated across democratic landscapes, particularly in Europe, where a growing number of leaders have emulated the Trumpian style of populism. Populism is a political phenomenon that can assume various forms, ideologies, and strategies. To grasp its significance, it is crucial to understand what populism is and how it operates. Populism is often defined as an anti-estab-

lishment, anti-elite ideology and political strategy, with populists claiming to represent the "people" against the corrupt "elite." Ernesto Laclau (2005) suggests that populism is a form of political articulation in which various social demands are unified into a common cause by a leader who claims to speak on behalf of the people. This conception emphasizes the fluid and contingent nature of populism, which can assume different ideological shapes based on local political contexts.

In contrast, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that divides society into two groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. This definition is significant because it highlights the ideological simplicity of populism, which allows it to adapt to various political and social contexts. Moffitt (2016) adds to this discussion by focusing on the performative aspects of populism, which include the use of charismatic leadership, crisis rhetoric, and emotional appeals. According to Moffitt, populism is as much about political style as it is about ideology, making it a highly adaptable and potent force in contemporary politics.

Populism underscores the distinction between "the people" and "the elite," portraying the former as virtuous, homogeneous, and united, while the latter is depicted as corrupt, self-serving, and out of touch with the public. Populist movements often thrive on a deep-seated distrust of established political, economic, and cultural elites. This anti-elitism is a central rallying point, where populist leaders cast themselves as outsiders in direct opposition to the "corrupt" institutions of liberal democracy. Populism often revolves around a charismatic leader who claims to embody the will of the people, offering a direct, unmediated connection between themselves and their supporters. This captures the essence of populist leadership, exemplified by Donald Trump. By adopting a "man of the people" persona, Trump leverages emotional appeals and constant media presence to forge a direct connection with his base. His rhetoric often prioritises immediate emotional gratification over substantive policy or long-term vision, fostering loyalty through identity and grievance politics. This strategy, while effective in mobilising support, risks undermining informed civic engagement and sustainable governance.

3. Trumpism: A Subtype of Populism

While Trump's politics exemplify many classical populist features, his political style and governance strategies represent a distinct variant, Trumpism. Trumpism can be conceptualised as a subtype of right-wing populism characterized by the confluence of charismatic leadership, anti-elitism, ethnonationalism, and institutional erosion. Trumpism builds on charismatic leadership in the Weberian sense, wherein legitimacy stems not from rational-legal authority or tradition but from the leader's personal appeal and performative capacity to embody the will of the people (Weber, 1947). Trump's self-styled image as an outsider, a businessman who can "drain the swamp," and his unfiltered communication via social media resonate with Moffitt's (2016) notion of populist performance.

Trumpism expresses a radical anti-elitism that targets not only traditional political elites but also bureaucrats, technocrats, intellectuals, scholars, the media, and even the judiciary. This broadening of the enemy spectrum creates a polarizing discourse that undermines pluralism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Trump's open defiance of judicial orders and his confrontations with the judiciary are unmistakable markers of authoritarian instinct. By portraying lawful constraints as illegitimate attacks and encouraging supporters to view courts as partisan enemies, Trump erodes the foundational principle of the rule of law. His behaviour mirrors classic authoritarian tactics: delegitimizing independent institutions, personalizing power, and framing legal accountability as political persecution. Far from mere political theatre, this conduct represents a calculated assault on constitutional democracy, normalizing contempt for legal norms essential to a free society.

Ethnonationalism is a central component of Trumpism. Through rhetoric on border walls, Muslim bans, and "America First," Trumpism narrows the definition of the "people" to a culturally and racially exclusive category, aligning it with exclusionary nationalist ideologies prevalent among European far-right movements (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). From questioning the legitimacy of elections to attacking independent institutions, Trumpism reveals a tendency toward autocratisation, what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe as democratic backsliding through legal means. Thus, Trumpism transcends classical populism by embedding it within a framework of illiberalism, making it not just a critique of liberal democracy but a potential internal threat to its sustenance. Following Weber's (1947) framework, Trump can be understood as a charismatic leader whose authority comes not from

legal-rational structures but from his ability to connect with the emotions of his followers.

Trump's anti-elitism transcends traditional political elites, encompassing not only politicians but also journalists, academic experts, the judiciary, and other institutional actors. His rhetoric frequently targets these groups as part of a larger "deep state" conspiracy, fostering a narrative that undermines trust in democratic institutions. This radical anti-elitism aligns with Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) idea of populism as a rejection of established elites and institutions. One of the most dangerous aspects of Trumpism is its challenge to democratic norms and institutions. Trump's constant attacks on the media, judiciary, immigrants, universities, and electoral systems, coupled with his efforts to undermine checks and balances, represent a direct threat to the liberal democratic order. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, this erosion of norms can lead to democratic backsliding, where the formal structures of democracy remain intact, but their substance is hollowed out.

4. Populist Contagion in Europe: Case Studies and Analysis

Populism capitalises on public frustration with political elites, economic inequality, and perceived threats to national identity (Mudde, 2014). The populist contagion theory suggests that populist movements can spread across borders, gaining strength from one another's successes. This phenomenon has become increasingly visible in Europe, where populist rhetoric has disrupted established political norms, inspired by leaders like Trump. His appeal to nationalist sentiments, anti-immigration policies, and scepticism of democratic norms serves as a model for various European leaders (Norris, 2016).

Consequently, Europe has witnessed a rise in populist leaders and movements that echo the Trumpian playbook. Figures such as Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni in Italy, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary have adopted similar rhetoric and policy proposals, drawing on themes of nationalism, anti-elitism, and criticism of the EU. The diffusion of Trumpism across Europe can be seen as part of a broader populist contagion, where leaders learn from one another and adopt common strategies, both in terms of style and substance.

In Hungary, the populist challenge has manifested in a systematic erosion of democratic institutions. Orbán's government in Hungary has been characterised by the consolidation of power through reforms that undermine judicial independence, limit media freedom, and curtail civil society. Orbán's

rhetoric aligns closely with Trumpian populism, framing his government as a defender of national sovereignty against external forces, particularly the EU and liberal elites. Orbán's framing of Hungary as a bastion of "illiberal democracy" has found resonance with other populist leaders, both within and outside Europe (Ágh, 2016).

In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (*Prawo I Sprawiedliwość, PiS for short),* a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party, has adopted similar measures, including judicial reforms that weaken the independence of the judiciary. These reforms have been justified as necessary to restore national sovereignty and the will of the people. The PiS's populist rhetoric emphasizes nationalism and critiques of foreign influence, particularly from the EU. These changes have led to clashes with the EU, as democratic backsliding in the countries has been described as a "populist contagion" spreading across Central and Eastern Europe (Kundnani, 2020).

Since the 2023 parliamentary elections, Poland's political landscape has undergone major shifts, reflecting both democratic renewal and emerging tensions. The elections saw a coalition of the Civic Coalition (KO), Third Way (TD), and New Left (NL) end the Law and Justice (PiS) party's rule, aided by public protests against the controversial "Lex Tusk" law. This transition was noted positively in the 2024 Democracy Index, which rated Poland a "flawed democracy" with a score of 7.4 (Freedom House, 2025).

However, the democratic gains faced new tests with the June 1, 2025, presidential election. Karol Nawrocki, a conservative historian with no prior political experience, narrowly defeated pro-European candidate Rafał Trzaskowski, securing 50.89% of the vote. Nawrocki's victory, supported by Trump, signalled a resurgence of nationalist and Eurosceptic sentiments (The Guardian, 2025). Nawrocki's presidency introduces potential friction with Prime Minister Donald Tusk's centrist, pro-EU agenda. His veto power could impede key reforms, including judicial restructuring and civil rights advancements. Moreover, his alignment with populist leaders and opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership may alter Poland's foreign policy stance (Erlin and Lubowicka, 2025). While the 2023 vote marked a break from authoritarianism, the 2025 result highlights the ongoing struggle over Poland's democratic direction.

In France and Italy, populism has not yet led to the same level of institutional erosion as in Hungary and Poland. However, the rise of populist movements such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France and Matteo

Salvini's Lega in Italy has significantly tested the resilience of democratic norms. Both Le Pen and Salvini have capitalized on issues like immigration, Euroscepticism, and nationalism, tapping into public dissatisfaction with the political establishment (Taggart, 2002). Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) and Italy's first female prime minister, has emerged as a central figure in Europe's new populist wave. Her ideological proximity to Trump, Viktor Orbán, and other nationalist leaders marks a decisive challenge to the norms of liberal democracy and the European integration project.

Meloni's populism is rooted in a blend of nationalist rhetoric, anti-immigration stances, traditionalist values, and Euroscepticism, though she has moderated her tone. Nevertheless, her framing of Italian identity against perceived external threats, from migrants to Brussels bureaucracy, echoes a classic populist technique (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). This dichotomy undermines pluralism, a cornerstone of liberal democracy, by delegitimising dissent and minority rights.

At the European level, Meloni's rise reflects broader discontent with the EU's democratic deficit and perceived technocratic elitism. Her emphasis on national sovereignty over supranational authority poses risks to EU unity, especially in contexts like migration policy and rule-of-law enforcement (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021). Her government's attempts to control media narratives and limit civil society funding further mirror illiberal trends seen in Hungary and Poland, raising alarms about democratic backsliding within the EU's core members (Freedom House, 2023). This populist reorientation could erode democratic norms, exacerbate polarisation, and embolden authoritarian-leaning movements across the continent (Guriev, 2024).

Germany represents a different case where populism has gained significant support but has yet to pose an existential threat to the democratic order. The AfD has become a significant force, particularly in the eastern parts of the country, by emphasising nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. While Germany's historical memory of the dangers of populism and its robust democratic institutions have so far prevented the AfD from undermining democracy, the party's success highlights the challenges faced by even the most established democracies (Umansky *et al*., 2025). The AfD's rise has tested Germany's democratic resilience by exploiting divisions within the country, particularly around issues of migration and European integration. While the party has not yet posed a direct challenge

to democratic institutions, its influence is growing, and its presence in the Bundestag forces German policymakers to confront the populist challenge in a way that respects democratic principles without conceding to populist demands (Hutagalung, 2024).

5. Democratic Resilience and the Challenges

The resilience of European democracies has been tested by the rise of populist movements that often leverage democratic institutions to undermine them (Pappas, 2019). The rise of populism in Europe, exemplified by the Trumpian challenge to liberal democracy, has appraised the resilience of European democracies. The rise of populist leaders across Europe has raised questions about the resilience of liberal democracies. One of the most prominent examples of this trend is the phenomenon of Trump and his influence. Trump's presidency and political style served as a litmus test for the resilience of democratic institutions, norms, and public discourse. His influence in Europe, whether directly through the support of like-minded populist leaders or indirectly through the erosion of democratic norms, presents a challenge for understanding how democracies can resist authoritarian threats.

Democratic resilience, as conceptualized by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), refers to the ability of democratic systems to withstand challenges from authoritarian forces. They argue that the key to democratic resilience lies in the political norms and institutional arrangements that protect democracy from populist and authoritarian threats. Similarly, Merkel and Kneip (2018) emphasise the role of democratic institutions, including checks and balances and the judiciary, in safeguarding democracy. Diamond (2022), meanwhile, underscores the importance of civic culture and public discourse in maintaining democratic norms. These theories collectively highlight that democratic resilience is not solely dependent on institutions or formal rules but is deeply rooted in the culture and practices of democratic engagement.

Institutional resilience refers to the structural features of a political system that enable it to withstand challenges to its functioning. In the context of Trump's influence in Europe, institutional resilience can be evaluated by examining the strength of checks and balances, judicial independence, and the capacity of democratic institutions to curb executive power. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that democratic backsliding often begins with the erosion of institutional checks, such as weakening the independence of the

judiciary or undermining legislative oversight. In Europe, several countries have experienced populist leaders who have sought to erode institutional safeguards. For example, Viktor Orbán in Hungary has systematically undermined judicial independence and consolidated power within the executive, following the model seen in Trump's attack on US institutions (Huber and Pisciotta, 2022). Similarly, Poland's PiS has made efforts to control the judiciary, a move that mirrors Trump's dismissal of federal judges who ruled against his administration.

However, European democracies have generally shown resilience in resisting these trends, due in part to strong institutional safeguards such as an independent judiciary, a robust civil society, and a commitment to the rule of law (Merkel and Kneip, 2018). The EU itself plays a crucial role in reinforcing these institutional mechanisms, offering a source of external pressure on member states that attempt to undermine democratic norms.

Normative resilience refers to the strength of the democratic culture within a society, particularly its commitment to values such as political civility, the rule of law, and the acceptance of political competition. A key component of normative resilience is the degree to which citizens and political elites adhere to democratic norms, such as a commitment to truth and the rejection of authoritarian practices. Trump's repeated attacks on the media, rejection of established truths, and embrace of populist rhetoric created an environment where truth became increasingly relative, and political discourse became polarised. This shift in political culture has reverberated across Europe, where populist leaders have similarly attacked the media and espoused nationalist, often inflammatory rhetoric (Mudde, 2019).

Diamond (2019) argues that the erosion of political civility and the breakdown of normative commitments to truth are significant threats to democratic resilience. In Europe, countries like Italy and France have seen an uptick in populist rhetoric that undermines the trust between citizens and their institutions. However, the strength of democratic values in these societies has allowed for a degree of pushback against such rhetoric, with civil society organizations, independent media, and political elites defending democratic norms.

Discursive resilience is concerned with the quality of public discourse and the ability of a society to engage in meaningful contestation in the public sphere. This includes the role of the media, the diversity of perspectives available to the public, and the level of civic literacy among citizens. Trump's

political rise in the US was inextricably linked to his mastery of the media landscape, particularly social media platforms, which allowed him to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with his supporters (Tufekci, 2017). The influence of Trump's media strategies in Europe has been felt in both the growth of populist movements and the challenges to media pluralism. The rise of far-right media outlets and social media echo chambers has contributed to the fragmentation of the public sphere, making it more difficult to have a common, informed public discourse (Erisen and Erisen, 2025). As Merkel and Kneip (2018) suggest, the decline of a shared political culture and the increasing polarisation of public debate pose a significant threat to democratic resilience.

However, Europe's media landscape remains more diverse and pluralistic than that of the US, offering a degree of resilience against the spread of disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion. The EU's regulations on digital platforms, such as the Digital Services Act, aim to counter the harmful effects of misinformation and strengthen the integrity of public discourse.

6. Political Contagion and Transnational Populism

The political contagion that Trump has unleashed represents a crucial challenge to the resilience of liberal democracies, particularly in Europe. In examining how populism travels across borders, scholars like Turnbull, Norris, and Inglehart have identified two main types of populism; ideational and stylistic. Ideational populism refers to a political ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups; the virtuous people and the corrupt elite. It advocates for the people's will to be paramount, often suggesting that traditional democratic institutions are no longer capable of representing the people's interests (Mudde, 2004). Stylistic populism, on the other hand, is characterised by a rhetorical approach that includes emotional appeal, a charismatic leader, and an antagonistic tone towards the media and political establishment. Turnbull *et. al.* (2024), in their study of populist movements, highlight how the ideational framework of populism can easily be adapted to different political contexts, thus facilitating its spread.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) discuss how cultural backlash, especially in the context of globalisation and increasing immigration, has propelled populist sentiments across the Western world. They argue that the rise of populist leaders like Trump coincides with the erosion of traditional polit-

ical ideologies and that the populist appeal, whether ideational or stylistic, is rooted in fears about cultural identity and national sovereignty. These factors enable the global spread of populism as a response to the perceived failure of liberal democratic institutions to address the concerns of ordinary citizens.

Trump, often hailed as the embodiment of modern populism, has become a symbolic figure for illiberal actors worldwide. Trump's appeal lies not only in his populist rhetoric but also in his rejection of traditional democratic norms, including his disdain for the media, his manipulation of public discourse, and his encouragement of divisive nationalism. In this regard, Trump represents the intersection of ideational and stylistic populism, offering a model that other populist leaders can adopt and adapt to their political contexts.

As Gifford (2019) argues, the global spread of populism is facilitated by the ease with which Trump's style and ideological messaging can be transferred. Populist leaders in countries such as Brazil, Hungary, and Poland have adopted Trump's "America First" rhetoric, invoking nationalist sentiments to undermine multilateralism and international cooperation. Similarly, in countries like Italy and France, populist leaders have borrowed Trump's combative style, using social media platforms to rally supporters, discredit their opponents, and attack the political establishment (Pappas, 2019). This stylistic contagion is emblematic of the transnational nature of populism, where the figure of Trump serves as a blueprint for political actors seeking to challenge democratic norms and consolidate power.

7. The Trump Effect in Europe: Mapping the Impact

The transatlantic ripple effects of Trump's rise were evident in subsequent European elections, where themes of "taking back control," anti-immigration rhetoric, Euroscepticism, and "fake news" became increasingly mainstream (Norris, 2016). These trends manifested in electoral gains for far-right and nationalist parties, some of which drew direct inspiration from Trump's rhetoric and digital campaign strategies. Notably, Trump's second success helped reframe what was politically permissible. Politicians who once skirted the edges of populist discourse now openly espoused nativist, anti-globalist, and anti-elitist messages. The normalisation of such rhetoric has raised questions about the robustness of European democratic norms and institutions in the face of populist insurgency.

One of the clearest examples of Trump's influence in Europe can be seen in the rhetorical evolution of Marine Le Pen. Before 2016, Le Pen focused largely on immigration and national identity; after Trump's election, her rhetoric increasingly incorporated his themes of anti-globalism, media delegitimisation, and economic nationalism. Le Pen adopted Trump's sloganised style, using terms like "patriots *vs.* globalists" and echoing his call to protect national industries and borders. She described Trump's victory as "a sign of hope for all those who cannot bear wild globalization anymore" (Chrisafis, 2016). Furthermore, her strategic repositioning included a shift toward "normalized extremism," seeking to mainstream radical ideas under a veneer of democratic legitimacy. Le Pen normalised populist rhetoric and significantly reshaped France's political landscape.

Germany's far-right party, AfD, also adopted Trumpian strategies, particularly the use of "alternative facts" and misinformation to destabilise public discourse. AfD politicians frequently portrayed mainstream media as enemies of the people, disseminated conspiracy theories about refugees and Covid-19, and sought to delegitimise Germany's democratic institutions. The term "alternative facts," coined infamously by Kellyanne Conway, was co-opted by AfD supporters on social media to defend narratives counter to established evidence, especially during the 2017 federal elections and later during anti-lockdown protests (Arzheimer, 2018). AfD's digital strategy emulated the Trump campaign's use of targeted disinformation, memes, and viral content to bypass traditional media gatekeeping (Fielitz and Marcks, 2019). Though still a pariah to many in Germany, AfD has managed to gain seats in the Bundestag and dominate regional parliaments in the former East Germany. Their resilience, despite being subject to domestic intelligence surveillance, reflects a broader erosion of post-war taboos in German politics.

In Spain, the Trump effect found resonance in the rise of Vox, a nationalist party that burst onto the national stage in 2018. Vox represents a synthesis of Trumpian populism and Spanish nationalist revivalism. The party has embraced anti-globalism, anti-immigration, and anti-feminist narratives and opposes climate change policies, multiculturalism, and international treaties, which it sees as infringing on national autonomy, and positions itself as a defender of national sovereignty against perceived threats from both the EU and domestic "elites." Santiago Abascal, the leader of Vox, openly praised Trump and echoed his rhetoric by describing the Spanish left as a threat to "traditional values" and "civilization" (Turnbull, 2019). The party's communi-

cation strategy mimicked Trump's digital populism, heavy reliance on Twitter, emotional appeals, and confrontation with journalists. Their success, becoming the third-largest party in the Spanish Congress by 2019, illustrates the effectiveness of this Trumpian posture in reshaping right-wing discourse in Southern Europe.

While the Trump Effect empowered populist movements, it also provoked robust democratic responses in many European contexts. Civic activism, investigative journalism, judicial interventions, and grassroots organizing have often counterbalanced the populist tide. For example, Emmanuel Macron's 2017 victory and pro-European platform can be seen as a liberal counterpunch to Le Pen's Trumpist overtures. Similarly, the decline in AfD's popularity in parts of Germany post-2021, particularly among young voters, reflects a democratic immune response. European institutions have proven more resistant to populist capture than their US counterparts, due in part to proportional electoral systems, stronger public broadcasting traditions, and active civil societies (Gidron and Ziblatt, 2019). The Trump dilemma, therefore, serves as both a test and a catalyst for European democracy to either succumb to the erosion of norms or renew its foundational commitments through reform and engagement.

8. Discursive and Media Influence

Trump did not merely mark a transformation of US domestic politics; it radiated global discursive and political shockwaves, particularly across Europe. The "Trump effect" extended beyond policy to the realms of political language, communication strategies, and media dynamics. As European democracies grapple with rising populism and illiberal currents, Trump's rhetorical style, delegitimisation of democratic norms, and use of algorithmically amplified social media channels have provided both a model and a warning.

Trump's political communication was characterized by what Fairclough (1993) would define as a "radical recontextualisation" of political discourse. Trump routinely employed rhetorical strategies that undermined deliberative norms, relying on conspiracy theories, ad hominem attacks, and performative antagonism. In Europe, these styles were not merely observed but emulated, particularly by far-right and anti-establishment parties.

One of the most salient effects was the normalisation of conspiracy theories. Trump's promotion of "deep state" narratives, voter fraud claims, and QAnon-affiliated content found receptive audiences across the Atlantic.

In countries such as Germany, France, and Italy, far-right actors increasingly adopted similar tropes, from migration conspiracies (e.g., the "Great Replacement") to Covid-19 denialism (Farkas and Schou, 2024). These narratives shifted the Overton window of acceptable discourse, making once-marginal ideas central to public debate.

The role of algorithmically driven media ecosystems, particularly social media, cannot be overstated in the diffusion of Trumpian discourse. Trump's strategic use of Twitter bypassed traditional media filters, fostering a direct, emotional, and often inflammatory communication style that became emblematic of populist digital politics (Ott, 2016). The platform's engagement-maximising algorithms privileged sensationalist content, allowing conspiracy theories, polarising rhetoric, and culture war narratives to thrive (Tufekci, 2018). This model was transposed into Europe with alarming effectiveness. Right-wing populist parties such as Vox in Spain and the Sweden Democrats adopted similarly provocative online strategies, using memes, disinformation, and outrage to mobilize supporters and manipulate the public sphere (Farkas and Schou, 2020). Social media not only democratised access to political audiences but also created fragmented echo chambers, reinforcing confirmation bias and radicalising discourse.

The consequence is what scholars term the "platformisation of populism," where tech infrastructures amplify anti-democratic sentiment by rewarding emotional intensity over deliberative reasoning (Gerbaudo, 2019). In this context, democratic institutions become vulnerable not through outright suppression but through discursive corrosion; truth becomes negotiable, facts are politicised, and democratic accountability is undermined. Yet, Europe's response to the Trump dilemma has not been monolithic. While some countries experienced a rise in illiberal discourse, others have reinforced democratic safeguards. The European Commission's Digital Services Act and Code of Practice on Disinformation signal an effort to regulate the algorithmic dynamics of online speech (European Commission, n.d.). Independent media and fact-checking organisations have also expanded, countering the viral spread of falsehoods.

Moreover, Trumpism served as a cautionary tale for many centrist leaders in Europe. Figures like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron deliberately framed their leadership in contrast to Trump, emphasising liberal democratic values, the rule of law, and multilateralism. Public resistance to populist extremes in elections, such as the defeat of far-right parties in several Euro-

pean countries post-2020, suggests that democratic norms retain deep societal roots. Nonetheless, the resilience of European democracies remains uneven and contingent. The erosion of discursive norms, particularly among younger digital-native populations, raises long-term questions about the integrity of public discourse. As Habermas (1989) warned, the public sphere is vital to democracy not merely as a venue of expression but as a space of rational-critical debate. The Trump effect, amplified algorithmically, threatens to replace this with emotional spectacle.

9. Institutional and Normative Stress

Trump's disruptive rhetoric, defiance of liberal democratic norms, and transactional approach to governance challenged not only American institutions but also strained the normative consensus underpinning transatlantic alliances. In Europe, this phenomenon created what may be termed institutional and normative stress, testing both the strength of democratic institutions and the resilience of civil society actors.

While the erosion of democratic norms in Hungary and Poland predates the Trump era, his ascendancy provided a global legitimisation for illiberal leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński. Both Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS had, by the mid-2010s, already embarked on reconfiguring judicial institutions, weakening media independence, and constraining civil liberties (Csaky, 2020). Trump's open disdain for judicial oversight, media scrutiny, and international institutions resonated deeply with these regimes, offering both ideological encouragement and a shield against Western criticism.

The Trump era introduced a form of normative stress wherein democratic norms, once assumed stable, were openly contested. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance are crucial for the survival of democracy. Trump's habitual violation of these norms normalised similar conduct among European populists, who increasingly disregarded institutional restraints and framed opposition as existential threats. This erosion of normative boundaries placed pressure not only on domestic institutions but also on transnational frameworks such as the EU, which struggled to enforce rule-of-law mechanisms without appearing politically intrusive.

The transatlantic alliance also suffered institutional strain. Trump's ambivalence toward NATO, withdrawal from international agreements, and

transactional diplomacy undercut longstanding security and democratic partnerships (Daalder and Lindsay, 2018). For countries in Eastern Europe, this created uncertainty about the reliability of US support while offering a pretext to pivot inward or align with alternative powers like Russia and China. In effect, Trump's disregard for normative leadership responsibilities undermined the soft power legitimacy that had previously sustained democratic convergence in post-communist Europe.

10. Resilience in Action: European Responses

Trump's transactional foreign policy, disregard for multilateralism, and open admiration for illiberal strongmen like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un posed a dual challenge to European unity and liberal democratic norms within the continent. As such, Europe's response became a critical stress test for the resilience of its democratic institutions. The analyses include three core domains of democratic resilience: civil society activism, institutional guardrails, and political party realignments.

Civil society has emerged as a powerful force in shaping Europe's democratic response to global populist pressures. Grassroots movements served both as symbolic and practical counters to the ideological export of Trumpism, especially its nationalist, misogynistic, and anti-science rhetoric. The "Women's March Europe" galvanised thousands in European capitals to protest sexism and gender inequality. These events were not only reactive but also proactive in affirming European democratic values (Kováts and Pető, 2017). Similarly, "Fridays for Future," spearheaded by Greta Thunberg, mobilised millions of youth in climate strikes across the continent, offering a vision of participatory politics in contrast to anti-scientific populist narratives. This movement challenged the status quo and demanded urgent policy reform, thereby reinvigorating environmental democracy (Moor de *et. al.* 2020).

Pro-European movements such as "Pulse of Europe" arose in response to the rising tide of Euroscepticism, particularly in the wake of Brexit and the Trump administration's criticisms of NATO and the EU. These movements symbolised a reinvestment in European ideals and sought to rebuild trust in liberal institutions (Porta and Caiani, 2009). Collectively, these instances illustrate the vitality of civic agency in resisting illiberal currents. Though originally founded in the UK, "Extinction Rebellion" expanded rapidly across Europe. Unlike Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion adopted a more radical

strategy, including civil disobedience and mass arrests to highlight climate inaction. Its presence in Germany, the Netherlands, and France demonstrated the willingness of European activists to push democratic boundaries for urgent causes.

While street politics played a visible role, institutional guardrails quietly underpinned Europe's democratic resilience. National courts and supranational institutions served as critical bulwarks against illiberal backsliding. Germany's Federal Constitutional Court has maintained its role as a "guardian of the basic law," defending fundamental rights and the principle of proportionality even when political consensus faltered. Its rulings on data privacy, surveillance, and checks on European Central Bank policy highlight its proactive stance (Komárek, 2014). Importantly, the court acts not merely as a legal actor but as a cultural and constitutional interpreter of liberal democracy.

At the supranational level, the European Union's Article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary for rule-of-law violations represent an institutional attempt to discipline member states that deviate from core democratic norms (Michelot, 2019). Although the mechanisms are politically constrained, their activation signals normative boundaries within the Union. Moreover, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has increasingly asserted itself in countering democratic erosion. Through landmark decisions, such as those involving the Polish judiciary, the ECJ has established jurisprudence linking the rule of law with mutual trust between EU member states (Kochenov and Pech, 2015). The ECJ's expanding role demonstrates how judicial authority can function transnationally in the preservation of democratic standards.

Democratic resilience also hinges on the adaptability of the party system. Faced with the rise of far-right populists and Trump-inspired ethnonationalism, Europe's mainstream political parties have adopted a range of strategies, ranging from partial accommodation to principled resistance. A notable case of principled centrism is Emmanuel Macron's En Marche, which emerged as a centrist force countering both right-wing populism and leftist disaffection. Macron's pro-European, socially liberal platform offered a stark contrast to the populist wave while simultaneously disrupting the traditional left-right divide (Cole, 2022). Macron's electoral success and policy initiatives, particularly his efforts toward EU reform, represent a recalibration of liberalism for the 21st century.

Similarly, Angela Merkel offers a case of ideological steadiness under populist pressure. Her refusal to pander to the far-right AfD and her commitment to multilateralism and refugee protection were acts of political courage. Merkel's approach signalled that mainstream conservatism could uphold liberal-democratic values without capitulating to xenophobia (Niu *et. al.* 2023). Yet, not all party responses have been successful. Some traditional parties attempted to co-opt populist rhetoric, particularly on immigration and national identity, only to lose both legitimacy and voter trust. This underscores the importance of principled rather than opportunistic realignment in the defence of democratic norms (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017).

11. Conclusion

Donald Trump's political legacy will leave a discernible imprint on Europe, but its effects are deeply uneven. While some European democracies have activated resilience mechanisms in response to the rising tide of populist illiberalism, these mechanisms remain embryonic and structurally fragile. This conclusion is both analytically persuasive and normatively urgent, though its cautious optimism perhaps underplays the extent to which institutional resilience must be understood not as a pre-existing feature of democratic systems but as a contingent and contested outcome of political struggle.

11.1 Relational Resilience and the Politics of Disruption

Democratic resilience is not static or intrinsic to liberal institutions but emerges relationally in response to disruption. In this framework, Trumpism functions as an external stressor, a model of governance and rhetorical style that challenges foundational liberal norms, thereby triggering countervailing political and institutional responses. This insight is consistent with the literature on democratic backsliding and resilience, which conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process of contestation and adaptation (Merkel and Lührmann 2023; Vachudova, 2021). However, the conclusion might have further problematised the notion of resilience itself, especially when resilience, as in the case of Hungary or Poland, coexists with ongoing authoritarian consolidation. Resilience, in such instances, may paradoxically take the form of containment rather than reversal.

11.2 Legal and Institutional Guardrails

The invocation of EU Article 7 proceedings against Poland and Hungary underscores the centrality of supranational legal instruments in safeguarding democratic norms. Yet, as the conclusion concedes, these proceedings have been politically toothless, with both governments weaponising EU criticism to bolster nationalist narratives. The European Court of Justice (ECJ), in contrast, has occasionally succeeded in curbing illiberal excesses, ruling against Poland's judiciary reforms, for example (ECJ, 2021). Still, these legal victories often rely on prolonged procedural battles that fail to match the speed and agility of populist state capture (Everett, 2021). The conclusion appropriately raises this tension but could have more explicitly questioned whether Europe's rule of law architecture is structurally equipped for a world in which illiberal regimes operate within, rather than outside, legal frameworks.

11.3 Political Party Realignments and Strategic Adaptations

One of the most provocative findings in this study is the analysis of political party realignments. Traditional parties across Europe have shown varying degrees of accommodation toward populist themes, particularly on immigration and national sovereignty, without fully embracing the populist playbook. The conclusion points to Emmanuel Macron's centrist movement as a strategic counter-model: neither reactionary nor complacent, but proactively reframing liberalism around dignity, modernity, and civic responsibility. Similarly, Angela Merkel's brand of principled conservatism maintained a firm commitment to democratic norms even while navigating populist pressures, especially during the refugee crisis of 2015 (Möller, 2016). Yet the conclusion could be pushed further by interrogating the long-term sustainability of these political experiments. Macron's popularity has been volatile, and Merkel's departure left a vacuum that has emboldened the far-right AfD. Political adaptation, in short, may be necessary but insufficient without broader social legitimacy.

11.1 *The Risk of Mimicry: Between Resistance and Reproduction*

A deeper critique lies in the conclusion's implicit warning that resisting Trumpism is not merely a matter of opposing its most egregious manifestations but of avoiding its discursive and strategic mimicry. Too many European parties have flirted with adopting Trump-like rhetoric under the guise of electoral pragmatism, thus normalising the very narratives they seek to

contest. This form of mimetic resilience is self-defeating, blurring the lines between liberal and illiberal actors in the eyes of an already disillusioned electorate (Mounk, 2018). In this light, the conclusion rightly argues that Europe's democratic future hinges on offering compelling democratic narratives, not technocratic defences, but emotionally resonant, socially just visions that can outcompete the seductive simplicity of populism.

11.5 Toward a Proactive Democratic Ethos

The conclusion offers a valuable call to action that the task before Europe is not just defensive but imaginative. It is not enough to weather the Trump dilemma; democracies must redefine themselves in the wake of it. This demands bold reforms in democratic participation, digital governance, economic inclusion, and institutional accountability. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have argued, democracies die not only by coups but by a thousand cuts; they survive by a thousand acts of reinvention. The challenge, then, is to cultivate a democratic ethos that is both resilient and regenerative, capable not just of surviving populist shocks but of learning, transforming, and thriving in their aftermath.

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