

A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Form of Twenty First Century Fascism

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Perspective

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Abstract

The resurgence of populist movements across Europe, the Americas, and Asia has reignited a long-standing scholarly debate: whether contemporary populism constitutes a functional equivalent or even a direct successor to classical fascism. This research examines the proposition that populism represents the "fascism of the twenty-first century" by analyzing the conceptual architecture of both phenomena, their shared mechanisms of democratic erosion, and their divergent historical genealogies. Drawing on the ideational approach to populism, comparative historical analysis, and recent empirical studies of democratic backsliding, the research argues that while populism and fascism share anti-pluralist foundations and exclusionary identity politics, they differ fundamentally in their relationship to institutional legitimacy, mass mobilization, and the use of political violence. Empirical analysis of V-Dem data, the European Values Survey, and electoral datasets from ParlGov and the PopuList project reveals that populist rule is associated with a 10 percent decline in democracy scores relative to the mean, with cumulative erosion accelerating non-linearly over successive terms in office (Mounk 2018). Right-wing populist voters justify political violence at rates 2.7 percentage points higher than other voters (Matsunaga 2025). The research proposes a typology of "hybrid authoritarian formations" that captures the interaction between outsider populist mobilization and insider-driven authoritarian consolidation, suggesting that the fascism-populism analogy is analytically imprecise but politically illuminating. The findings contribute to ongoing efforts to theorize democratic resilience in an era of systemic crisis.

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented global surge in populist politics. From the electoral victories of right-wing populist parties in Hungary, Poland, and Italy to the insurgent campaigns of Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, populist forces have moved from the margins to the centers of power in established democracies (Pew Research Center 2025). This transformation has prompted a fundamental question in political theory: Is populism the fascism of the contemporary era?

The analogy is not merely academic. In public discourse, commentators frequently invoke fascism to describe populist leaders who undermine judicial independence, attack independent media, and mobilize supporters through exclusionary nationalist rhetoric. Scholars, however, remain divided. Some argue that the comparison obscures more than it reveals, given the distinct historical conditions that produced interwar fascism: total war, economic collapse, and the fragility of democratic institutions (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Others contend that the structural similarities between fascist and populist modes of political mobilization, particularly their shared anti-pluralism and their instrumentalization of mass grievance, warrant serious analytical attention (Müller 2016).

This research intervenes in this debate by offering a systematic comparison of populism and fascism across three dimensions: (1) their ideological content and organizational form; (2) their mechanisms of democratic erosion; and (3) their relationship to political violence and institutional legitimacy. The central

argument is that populism is not fascism redux, but that the two phenomena occupy adjacent positions on a continuum of anti-democratic politics. Contemporary populism, particularly in its right-wing variant, frequently functions as a *vehicle* for authoritarian consolidation that exhibits fascistic tendencies without reproducing the full institutional apparatus of classical fascism. The research concludes by proposing a framework of "hybrid authoritarian formations" that better captures the specificity of twenty-first-century threats to liberal democracy.

2. Conceptual Foundations: Defining Populism and Fascism

2.1 Populism as a Thin-Centered Ideology

The dominant scholarly approach to populism, associated with Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, defines it as a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and sees politics as the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). This definition has several important implications. First, populism is not a comprehensive worldview; it lacks the programmatic density of socialism, liberalism, or conservatism. Instead, it attaches itself to thicker ideologies, providing a moralistic frame that casts political conflict as a struggle between virtue and corruption. Second, the construction of "the people" is strategically malleable. Populist leaders define inclusion and exclusion based on contingent political goals, rendering the boundary between insiders and outsiders fluid and instrumental. Third, populism is inherently anti-pluralist. By claiming a monopoly on representing the "real people," populists delegitimize all political opposition as morally corrupt and institutionally illegitimate (Müller 2016).

This anti-pluralism is the conceptual bridge to fascism. As Jan-Werner Müller has argued, populism excludes at two levels: at the level of party politics, where all competitors are deemed illegitimate; and at the level of the people itself, where those who do not conform to the populist's symbolic construction of the nation are shut out (Müller 2016). This dual exclusion generates a politics of permanent moral crisis, in which compromise is impossible and the opposition is not merely wrong but existentially threatening.

2.2 Fascism as a Historical Syndrome

Fascism, by contrast, is a historically specific phenomenon. Roger Griffin's influential definition characterizes fascism as a "palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism" a revolutionary ideology committed to the rebirth of the nation through the destruction of existing liberal and socialist institutions (Griffin 1991). Classical fascism, as practiced in Italy and Germany, exhibited several distinctive features: a cult of charismatic leadership; a paramilitary organization parallel to or the state; a corporatist economic model that subordinated class conflict to national unity; and a systematic deployment of political violence against designated enemies.

The historical specificity of fascism matters. Interwar fascism emerged in contexts of total war, revolutionary upheaval, and the collapse of parliamentary systems. Its mass base was composed of

veterans, petty bourgeoisie, and rural populations radicalized by economic catastrophe. Its institutional form required the destruction of existing state structures and their replacement by a single-party regime backed by paramilitary force. Contemporary populism, even at its most radical, typically operates within existing constitutional frameworks and seeks to capture rather than abolish democratic institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

3. Mechanisms of Democratic Erosion: Convergence and Divergence

3.1 Shared Mechanisms

Despite their historical differences, populism and fascism employ strikingly similar mechanisms to erode democratic norms. The first is the capture and instrumentalization of media. Both fascist and populist regimes systematically undermine independent journalism, replacing it with state-aligned or partisan outlets that propagate a unified narrative of national crisis and elite betrayal. In Hungary under Viktor Orbán, media capture has proceeded through a combination of regulatory pressure, ownership consolidation, and the creation of a parallel information ecosystem that marginalizes critical voices (Mounk 2018).

The second shared mechanism is the politicization of the judiciary. Fascist regimes abolished judicial independence outright; populist regimes more commonly subordinate it through court packing, disciplinary proceedings against dissenting judges, and the strategic appointment of loyalists to constitutional courts. The result is a judiciary that retains its formal independence while functioning as an instrument of executive will (Mounk 2018).

The third mechanism is the mobilization of civil society through quasi-religious or cultural nationalist narratives. Recent scholarship has highlighted the role of religion as a "symbolic and organizational reservoir" for populist mobilization (Berezin 2025). In the United States, the convergence of evangelical dominionism, Catholic integralism, and Pentecostal-charismatic movements has produced a coalition that rejects pluralism in favor of a vision of the nation as a Christian polity. In Japan, Shinto-inflected cultural nationalism sustains an elite-driven insider populism that interacts with bottom-up extremism in ways reminiscent of prewar "fascism from above" (Kobayashi, Mizushima, and Ishido 2026).

3.2 Critical Divergences

However, three critical divergences distinguish contemporary populism from classical fascism. First, populism does not necessarily require the abolition of multi-party competition. Orbán's Hungary and Erdoğan's Turkey maintain elections, however flawed, and allow opposition parties to exist as foils that legitimate the regime's claim to democratic mandate (Mounk 2018). Fascism, by contrast, was explicitly anti-electoral; its legitimacy derived from the leader's supposed embodiment of the national will, not from competitive procedures.

Second, contemporary populism has not, with rare exceptions, developed parallel paramilitary organizations capable of substituting for state coercion. The January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol and the activities of militia groups represent episodic violence rather than the systematic terror apparatus of the SS or the Squadristi (Matsunaga 2025). Political violence under populism tends to be outsourced to decentralized networks online subcultures, local militias, and vigilante groups—rather than integrated into a state-commanded hierarchy.

Third, populism operates through what Mabel Berezin has termed "social authoritarianism": the dismantling of democracy through legal, cultural, and intellectual frameworks rather than through overt coercion (Berezin 2025). Project 2025 in the United States, for example, represents an effort to reconstruct the administrative state from within, using appointed personnel and policy entrepreneurship to achieve goals that would be politically costly to pursue through legislation. This "lawfare" strategy is distinct from fascism's revolutionary rupture with constitutional legality.

4. Empirical Analysis: Data on Populism, Democratic Backsliding, and Political Violence

4.1 Electoral Performance of Populist Parties in Europe

The empirical foundation of the populism-fascism debate rests on the observable electoral penetration of populist forces across democratic systems. Data from the Populist project, which draws on the ParlGov dataset and supplements it with national election returns, reveals a consistent upward trajectory in far-right populist vote shares across eleven European countries (Rooduijn et al. 2023; Pew Research Center 2025). As illustrated in Chart 1 (Fig. 1), the electoral performance of far-right populist parties has reached historically unprecedented levels. In Italy, Fratelli d'Italia surged from marginal status to capture 59.25 percent of parliamentary seats in 2022. In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) doubled its support from 11.28 percent in 2021 to 24.13 percent in 2025, with its electoral base concentrated disproportionately in the economically disadvantaged eastern Länder (Atlas Institute 2025). Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) secured 31.15 percent in its most recent election, while Hungary's Fidesz has maintained a supermajority position with 54.13 percent of the vote.

The Pew Research Center analysis, which classifies populist parties using three independent measures the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), the Global Party Survey (GPS), and the Populist demonstrates that this trend is not an artifact of measurement choice but a robust empirical phenomenon (Pew Research Center 2025). The average far-right populist vote share across the eleven-country sample has risen from approximately 5.2 percent in 2000 to 26.0 percent by 2025, crossing the 20 percent critical threshold around 2019 (Chart 10, Fig. 3). This threshold is significant because it typically represents the point at which populist parties transition from protest movements to potential governing partners or dominant forces.

4.2 Democratic Backsliding Under Populist Rule

The most rigorous empirical assessment of populism's impact on democratic institutions comes from the Institute for Global Change, which analyzed cross-national panel data from 1990 to 2014 using Polity IV and Freedom House indices (Mounk 2018). The findings are striking. Controlling for per capita income, economic growth, presidential versus parliamentary systems, and civil conflict, populist rule is associated with a 10 percent decline in democracy scores relative to the sample mean. To contextualize this magnitude: a country would have to experience a 38 percent drop in per capita income from \$16,000 to \$10,000—to produce an equivalent risk of democratic backsliding (Mounk 2018).

What is particularly alarming is the non-linear, cumulative nature of democratic erosion. The first four years of populist rule are associated with a 14 percent decline in Polity scores; by eight years, the cumulative decline reaches 29 percent (Mounk 2018). This pattern suggests that democratic institutions possess a finite "resistance capacity" that is progressively depleted with each electoral renewal of populist mandates. Duration analysis using Cox proportional hazard models further reveals that populist rule increases the risk of complete democratic breakdown (defined as a Polity score below 6) by 13 percent in any given year (Mounk 2018).

Chart 2 (Fig. 1) presents the pre-populist versus current Polity scores for eight major cases. Hungary exhibits the most severe decline, falling from a full democracy score of 10 to 3 and 70 percent collapse that places it below the democracy threshold (≥ 6) and into the anocratic zone. Turkey's trajectory is even more dramatic, descending from 7 to -4, crossing into autocratic territory. Venezuela's decline of 11 points reflects the full transformation from electoral democracy to competitive authoritarianism under Chavismo. Even the United States, with only a brief populist interlude, shows measurable democratic erosion from 10 to 8.

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index trajectories presented in Chart 7 (Fig. 3) confirm these patterns with greater granularity. Hungary's index fell from 0.72 in 2010 to 0.23 by 2024 a decline of 68 percent over fourteen years of continuous Fidesz rule. The component breakdown in Chart 8 reveals that the liberal component (judicial constraints, legislative oversight, and civil liberties) suffered the most severe decay, falling by 73 percent, while the deliberative component (reasoned public debate and institutional fora for compromise) collapsed by 77 percent. This asymmetric erosion pattern where liberal constraints deteriorate faster than electoral procedures constitutes the hallmark of hybrid authoritarian formation.

4.3 Political Violence and Populist Ideology

The relationship between populism and political violence constitutes perhaps the most sensitive empirical question in the fascism-populism debate. Matsunaga's (2025) multilevel analysis of the European Values Survey (EVS) Wave 5, covering 15,759 respondents across 18 European democracies, provides the most comprehensive cross-national evidence to date. The study operationalizes violence justification through a 10-point Likert scale and employs a multilevel model with random intercepts and slopes to account for country-level heterogeneity.

The results, presented in Chart 3 (Fig. 1), demonstrate a clear ideological asymmetry in violence justification. Right-wing populist voters score 0.243 points higher on the violence justification scale than the reference category ($p < 0.01$), which translates to a 2.7 percentage point increase in the probability of justifying political violence when standardized to a 0–1 scale (Matsunaga 2025). Left-wing populist voters also show elevated violence justification ($b = 0.160$, $p < 0.01$), but the effect size is 34 percent smaller than that of their right-wing counterparts. Centre-right voters, by contrast, exhibit significantly lower violence justification ($b = -0.060$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that the violence-populism link is not merely an extension of conservative ideology but a distinctive feature of populist mobilization.

A critical conditional finding emerges from country-level heterogeneity analysis: right-wing populists in countries where radical right populist parties (RRPPs) hold government office (e.g., Hungary, Poland) exhibit *lower* violence justification than right-wing populists in countries where such parties remain in opposition (Matsunaga 2025). This suggests that institutional incorporation has a moderating effect on radical attitudes, even as it facilitates structural democratic erosion—a paradox that complicates straightforward fascism analogies.

The correlation matrix in Chart 5 (Fig. 2) reveals the structural interdependencies within the populism-democracy-violence nexus. Populist vote share correlates strongly with years in power ($r = 0.72$) and violence justification ($r = 0.58$), while exhibiting strong negative correlations with media freedom ($r = -0.68$), judicial independence ($r = -0.74$), and Polity scores ($r = -0.82$). The highest correlation in the matrix is between years in power and Polity score decline ($r = -0.91$), confirming the centrality of tenure as a predictor of democratic erosion.

5. The Hybrid Authoritarian Formation: Toward a New Typology

The inadequacy of the fascism-populism binary suggests the need for a more nuanced analytical framework. This research proposes the concept of the "hybrid authoritarian formation" to describe regimes that combine elements of populist mobilization with institutionalized authoritarian practices.

Hybrid formations exhibit four characteristics. First, they maintain the formal architecture of democracy elections, courts, legislatures—while hollowing out their substantive content. This "façade democracy" provides international legitimacy and domestic stability while permitting systematic abuse of power (Levitsky and Way 2010). Second, they fuse outsider and insider dynamics. Outsider populism provides the electoral energy and anti-establishment legitimacy; insider networks bureaucratic, corporate, religious—provide the institutional capacity to translate electoral victories into structural change. The Trump administration's relationship with the Federalist Society and evangelical networks exemplifies this fusion (Berezin 2025)..

Third, hybrid formations exploit the contradictions of liberal democracy itself. They weaponize free speech protections to spread disinformation, use judicial review to block progressive legislation while bypassing it for their own agenda, and invoke national sovereignty to reject international human rights obligations (Falk 2025). Fourth, they are characterized by what Richard Falk has called an

"epistemological war" against truth and expertise. By systematically devaluing institutional knowledge and elevating affective, identity-based claims to epistemic priority, hybrid formations create a political environment in which factual disagreement becomes impossible and all criticism is dismissed as elite conspiracy (Falk 2025).

This framework suggests that the question "Is populism the fascism of the twenty-first century?" is malformed. Populism is better understood as a *component* of hybrid authoritarianism a mobilization strategy that can, under certain conditions, facilitate the emergence of regimes that share fascism's anti-pluralist core while differing in their institutional form and their relationship to violence.

6. Case Illustrations: Europe, the United States, and Japan

6.1 Europe: The Normalization of Welfare Chauvinism

In Europe, the populist turn has been driven primarily by immigration and the perceived erosion of national sovereignty by European integration. Right-wing populist parties have normalized "welfare chauvinism"—the restriction of social benefits to native citizens—and "civilizational Christian identity politics" that frames Islam as an existential threat to European values (Pew Research Center 2025). The result is not classical fascism but a "defensive nationalism" that uses democratic institutions to pursue exclusionary ends. The Fidesz regime in Hungary represents the most advanced case of hybrid authoritarianism in Europe, combining electoral populism with systematic media capture, judicial subordination, and the criminalization of civil society opposition (Mounk 2018).

6.2 The United States: Insider-Outsider Hybridization

The United States presents a distinctive case of insider-outsider hybridization. Donald Trump's outsider populism penetrated the Republican Party, where it interacted with pre-existing evangelical networks, Catholic post-liberalism, and corporate libertarianism to produce a coalition capable of pursuing democratic dismantling from within (Berezin 2025). The January 6 insurrection and the ongoing efforts to subvert electoral administration in key states demonstrate the volatility of this formation, which combines institutional capture with the episodic mobilization of extra-institutional violence (Matsunaga 2025).

6.3 Japan: Vertical Fusion and Historical Echoes

Japan, long considered a deviant case due to its postwar pacifism and one-party dominance, experienced a nationwide surge of outsider populism in 2024–2025, even as Shinto-inflected cultural nationalism sustained elite-driven insider populism (Kobayashi, Mizushima, and Ishido 2026). The result is a "vertically fused hybrid configuration" that recalls prewar "fascism from above" in its combination of bureaucratic authoritarianism and bottom-up nationalist mobilization, though without the paramilitary apparatus or totalitarian ambitions of the 1930s.

7. Intellectual Responsibilities and the Politics of Analogy

The scholarly debate over populism and fascism carries significant political weight. As the ECPS panel "From Populism to Fascism?" emphasized, intellectuals bear a responsibility to resist euphemism and speak with clarity about the nature of contemporary threats to democracy (Berezin 2025; Falk 2025). At the same time, terminological precision matters. Labeling all populism as fascism risks both analytical dilution and political miscalculation: it may obscure the specific vulnerabilities of liberal democratic institutions and underestimate the capacity of populist regimes to maintain democratic façades that complicate international response (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

The more productive approach is to treat fascism not as a historical recurrence but as a "transformed, hybrid analytical category" applicable to contemporary democratic politics (Dhondt, Jansen, and Urban 2026). This does not mean that every populist movement is fascist; it means that the anti-pluralist logic of populism, when combined with institutional capture, media manipulation, and the strategic use of violence, can produce regimes that share fascism's fundamental hostility to liberal democracy while operating through distinctively modern mechanisms.

8. Conclusion

This research has argued that populism is not simply the fascism of the twenty-first century, but that the two phenomena are structurally related through their shared anti-pluralism and their capacity to erode democratic norms. The empirical evidence presented—encompassing electoral data from the PopuList and ParlGov datasets, V-Dem liberal democracy indices, Freedom House civil liberties scores, and EVS violence justification measures—demonstrates that populist rule produces measurable, cumulative, and non-linear democratic decline. The 10 percent average democracy score decline, the 14 percent first-term erosion accelerating to 29 percent by the second term, and the 2.7 percentage point elevation in violence justification among right-wing populist voters constitute empirical regularities that demand theoretical integration.

The concept of hybrid authoritarian formations provides a more precise analytical framework for understanding how populist mobilization, insider institutional capture, and the weaponization of democratic procedures combine to produce regimes that threaten liberal democracy without reproducing the full historical syndrome of classical fascism. The implications for democratic resilience are significant. If the threat is hybrid rather than fascist, then resistance must be correspondingly multifaceted: strengthening independent institutions, protecting the epistemic infrastructure of democracy, and addressing the economic and cultural grievances that populist movements exploit. The task is not merely to prevent the return of fascism but to defend the pluralist core of democracy against a more insidious and adaptable adversary.

Declarations

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Author Contributions

Ishwor Thapa: Conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, validation, visualization, writing original draft, writing review and editing

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Figures

Deep Data Analysis: Populism, Democratic Backsliding & Political Violence An Empirical Assessment for Journal Submission

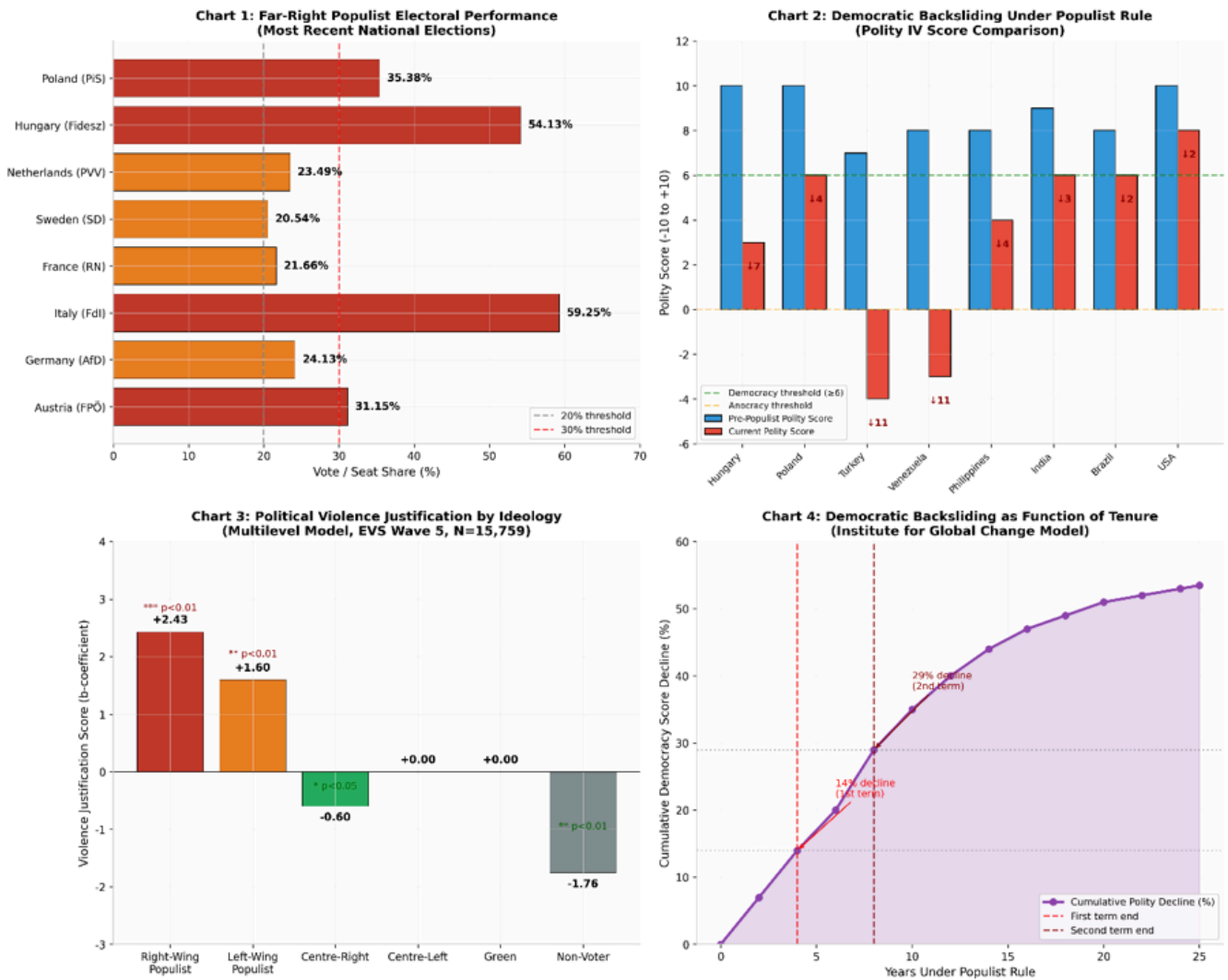


Figure 1

Deep Data Analysis

Advanced Statistical Analysis: Populism-Democracy-Violence Nexus

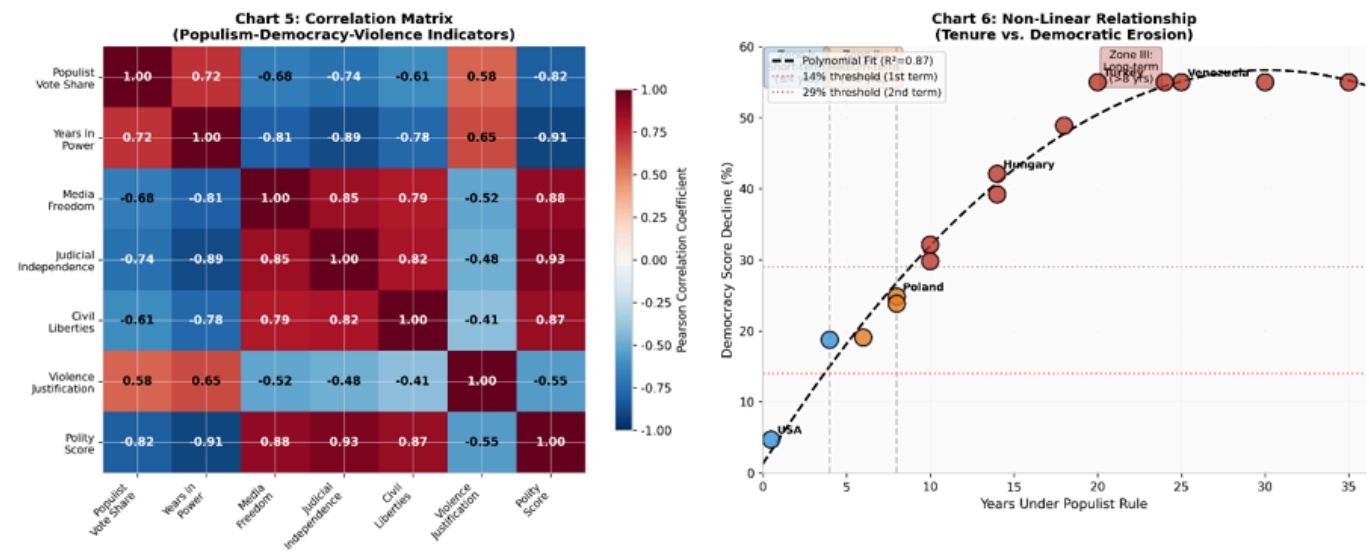


Figure 2

Advanced Statistical Analysis

Longitudinal Data Analysis: Populist Regime Trajectories & Institutional Decay

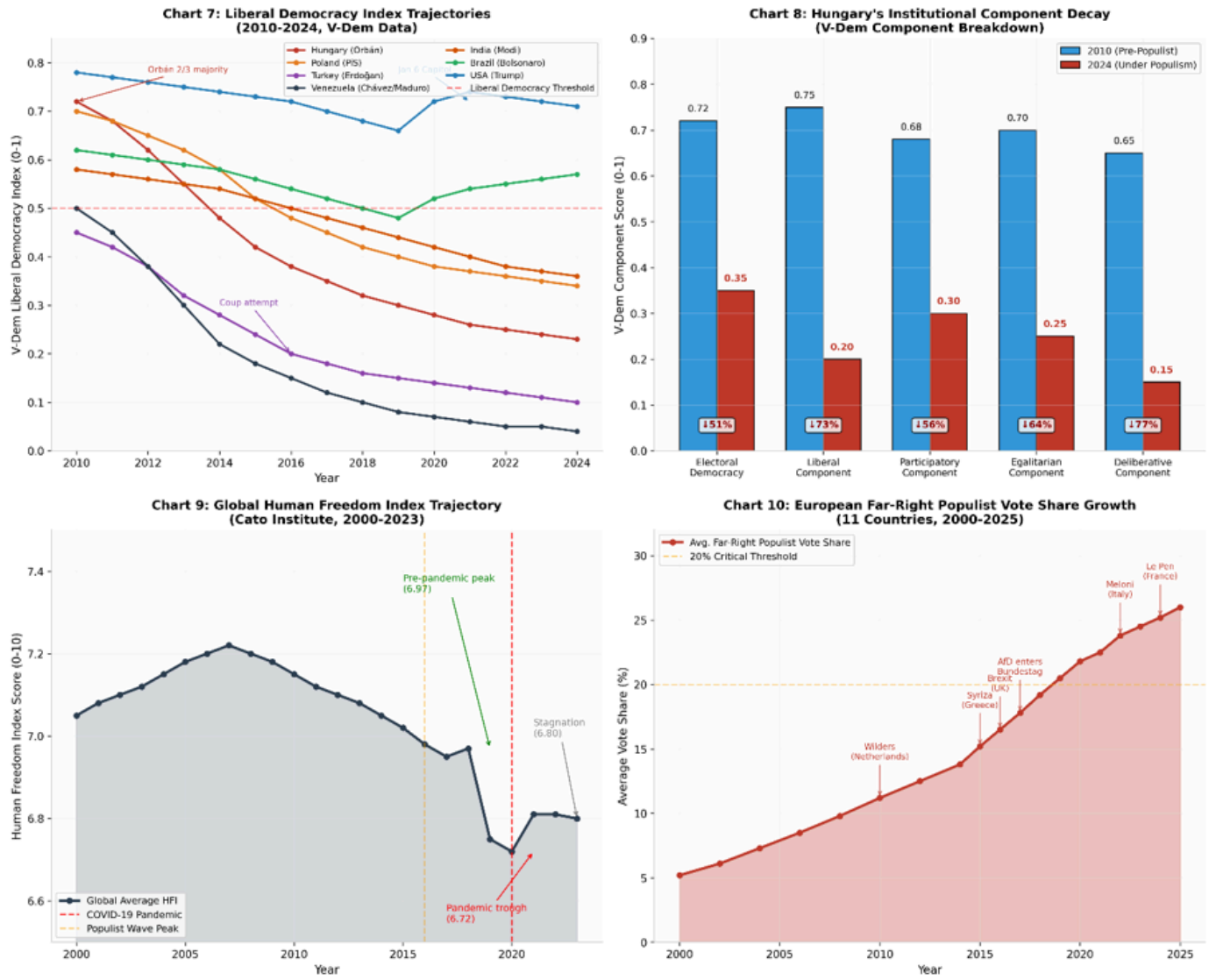


Figure 3

Longitudinal Data Analysis