

The Rule of Law, The Far-Right Populism and Global Democracy. Is Democracy in Decline?

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Abstract

The rise of far right "populism" has led to a new wave of anxiety regarding the constitution of liberal democracy and the rule of law. This study examines the relationship between far-right populism, the rule of law and democratic decline. This study uses convergent mixed methods research design. Primary data were collected through 29 purposively selected Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Content analysis was used to analyse the KII data, and descriptive statistics to quantify the prevalence of themes identified. Secondary evidence included academic and written reports on democracy and rule-of-law, as well as documentary evidence, such as substantive case evidence from Hungary, Poland and Italy. It was then followed by a hybridisation of the primary and secondary findings, via triangulation. The KIIs found four main pathways between far-right populism and democratic and rule-of-law violation. These comprised the curtailment of judicial independence, attacks on the freedom of the media and freedom of expression, executive power grab and restrictions on minority rights. Secondary evidence from Hungary, Poland and Italy also illustrated mechanisms of democratic erosion and showed how institutional constraints can restrict democratic erosion. The results also suggested a corrective nature of populism as it brings the neglected grievances to the fore and mobilises politically excluded groups. The study concludes that far-right populism does not automatically lead to the destruction of democracy. Its most significant danger lies in its subversion of electoral majorities into demands for unchecked political power and in the erosion of institutional limits, pluralism, rights and accountability. The study suggests, therefore, that reinforcing democratic resilience necessitates an independent judiciary, checks and balances within the executive branch, media freedom and good constitutional protection for minority rights.

Keywords: democracy, far right populism, rule offers law, minority rights

1. Introduction

Democracy is commonly understood as a system of government based on the consent and will of the governed; simply put as a government by the people. In Abraham Lincoln's conceptualization democracy denotes a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" Yet elections alone do not constitute democratic government. In respect of these conceptualizations, citizens exercise political power either directly or through representatives chosen in free and competitive elections. This basically implies a majority rule. However, democracy extends beyond the ability of the majority to select its leaders

According to Sedaca, democracy's core features include human rights protection, independent and free media, separation of power (with checks and balances), rule of law and due process safeguards for all, and free and fair election (Note1). These features demonstrate that democracy has both an electoral and a constitutional dimension. Electoral democracy emphasizes regular, inclusive and competitive elections through which citizens can choose and replace their leaders. On the other hand, liberal democracy includes these electoral features but also requires constitutional rights, judicial independence, protection of civil liberties and limits on government authority. The distinction above is important because a government may retain electoral legitimacy while weakening the institutions that constrain its power. Elections can establish who governs, but they do not give elected leaders unlimited authority to disregard constitutional rights, suppress political opposition or undermine judicial independence. Liberal democracy therefore qualifies majority rule by requiring elected governments to respect the rights of minorities, individuals and political opponents. For the purposes of this study, democracy is understood primarily in its liberal sense.

Democracy is already experiencing serious global pressure. Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, rights and practices, often by elected governments. Rather than occurring through sudden authoritarian rupture, it could take the form of ostensibly legal institutional and policial changes.

procedural changes that constrain institutional oversight and political competition. Rogers noted that such processes can exploit institutional rules and procedures to weaken democratic safeguards while maintaining the appearance of legality (Note 2). Democratic backsliding therefore involves gradual manipulation of democratic rules in ways that concentrate power and diminish meaningful political accountability.

A 2026 report by Freedom House pointed out that global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year in 2025 (Note 3). The report identified media freedom, personal expression and due process as among the areas most affected. Similarly, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute reported that nearly one-quarter of the world's countries were undergoing democratic backsliding or autocratisation in 2025 (Note 4). It further noted that the rule of law and institutional checks and balances were deteriorating in 22 countries. These findings first indicate that decline in democracy is a contemporary concern. Second, the developments also raise important questions concerning the causes and character of contemporary decline in democracy.

The rule of law is a central factor on whether or not democracy is in decline. According to the World Justice Project (WJP), rule of law denotes a robust system of laws, norms, institutions, and community commitment that offers four main universal principles (Note 5). These principles include accessible and impartial justice, open government, just laws, and accountability. The rule of law is essential in advancing democracy across the globe. First, it prevents majoritarian domination. It also limits executive overreach, supports credible elections and provides courts and citizens with mechanisms for challenging government abuses/ majority rule. However, the rule of law differs from rule by law. Under rule by law, governments use legal instruments to control society while disregarding equality, accountability and established constitutional rights.

Populism is generally understood as a political approach that constructs politics as a moral conflict between two supposedly opposing groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” Populist actors claim to represent the authentic interests or general will of ordinary citizens and frequently portray established political institutions and elites as detached from popular concerns. This was aptly put by Cas Mudde who, in using an ideational approach, noted that populism is a “thin-centred ideology” that views society as ultimately divided between a homogeneous and virtuous people and a corrupt elite, and argued that politics should express the general will of the people (Note6). Because populism is a flexible political phenomenon, it can be combined with ideologies on both the left and right extreme opposite ends of the political spectrum.

The concept of the far right is broader than populism. Pirro conceptualises the far right as an umbrella category encompassing ultranationalist collective actors that share an exclusionary and authoritarian worldview (Note7). Its ideological core consists principally of nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism represents an exclusionary form of nationalism in which the political community is conceived primarily in terms of a native national or cultural group, while those considered non-native—including migrants, ethnic or religious minorities and perceived cultural or political outsiders—may be constructed as threats to national cohesion. Authoritarianism, meanwhile, places greater emphasis on social order, obedience and the subordination of those perceived to violate established norms.

Importantly, Pirro distinguishes between two broad components within the far right: the populist radical right and the extreme right (Note 8). Their principal distinction concerns their relationship with democracy. Populist radical-right actors generally accept elections and other procedural features of democracy but may contest the liberal content of democratic government, including political rights, civil liberties and institutional constraints. Extreme-right actors, by contrast, may reject democracy more fundamentally. This distinction is important for the present study because it prevents far-right politics from being treated as a single, uniformly anti-democratic phenomenon. The focus here is principally on far-right actors that seek political power through electoral and democratic institutions while advancing exclusionary and authoritarian political agendas.

Far-right populism can therefore be understood as the intersection of populist claims to represent the authentic people with the nativist and authoritarian commitments characteristic of the far right. It combines the populist construction of politics as a struggle between a legitimate people and corrupt or unresponsive elites with an exclusionary conception of national membership and political community. The more important question is what happens when far-right populist claims to represent the authentic will of the people come into conflict with the pluralism, rights and institutional constraints that underpin liberal democracy.

This study examines the relationship between the rule of law, far-right populism and the decline of global democracy. It asks: To what extent does the rise of far-right populism undermine the rule of law and contribute to the decline of global democracy? The study argues that global democracy is experiencing significant but uneven democratic backsliding. Far-right populism can contribute to democratic backsliding by exploiting the legitimacy of electoral majorities to weaken the rule-of-law institutions and constitutional constraints that distinguish liberal democracy from mere electoral rule. Far-right populism is not, however, the sole cause of democratic erosion. Nevertheless, democratic decline is not inevitable or irreversible.

The study first establishes the relationship between democracy, the rule of law and democratic backsliding before examining the distinctive characteristics of far-right populism in its introductory section. It then presents the methodology adopted to investigate the relationship between far-right populism, the rule of law and democratic decline. The study's findings and discussion section subsequently analyses the principal mechanisms through which far-right populist politics can weaken democratic institutions and rights. This section also considers competing interpretations of populism's effects on democracy. Lastly, the study provides a conclusion of the subject matter addressed in the study.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods research design. The research design of this study is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the connection between far-right populism, the rule of law and democratic erosion. The design allows the findings on primary and secondary information to be analysed separately then triangulated. Primary data consists of 29 purposive KIIs with those who have domain knowledge and/or scholarly practice in the study's field of interest/s. Informants comprised legal and political scholars, legal practitioners, human-rights and civil-society practitioners, the media, governance practitioners and researchers with pertinent experience. The purposive nature of the selection assured that the subjects would have content knowledge about the institutional and political processes studied. Thematic saturation was used to gauge the sufficiency of the 29 interviews.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative KII data. Themes from the KIIs were used both as a guide in coding. Descriptive statistics were used for the quantitative component to summarise the results of the KII. Frequencies and percentages were used to show how many respondents identified particular themes. The results were reported using tables and graphs.

Secondary data included academic literature, international democracy/rule of law reports and documentary evidence. The relevant context indicators of democratic performance, freedom and the rule of law from V-Dem, Freedom House and the World Justice Project were provided. Qualitative content analysis of literature, reports, institutional development and political/legal events in the past were the substantive case evidence for the experiences of Hungary, Poland and Italy. This was not however the case of quantitatively comparable cases. The cases provided contextual evidence of the four mechanisms identified in the study. The three countries (Hungary, Poland and Italy) provide a European basis for interpreting the interview findings. Hungary and Poland provide particularly relevant cases of institutional contestation involving the judiciary, executive authority and minority rights. On the other hand, Italy provides a case in which proposed institutional changes associated with executive strengthening encountered significant political and institutional constraints. The cases are not presented as identical examples or as representative of all far-right populist governments. On the contrary, they provide analytically contrasting cases through which the mechanisms identified by the informants can be examined across different institutional and political contexts. The European cases provide concrete illustrations of democratic backsliding processes can operate within particular national contexts, while the present KII findings indicate that the same broad mechanisms are recognised by informed observers in the study context. The convergence between these levels of evidence strengthens the analytical plausibility of the framework while preserving the distinction between contextual evidence and general claims.

Finally, the qualitative findings from the KIIs, descriptive statistics and secondary case/documentary evidence were brought together through triangulation. This enabled researchers to compare the perceptions of key informants with evidence of changes in democracy and rule of law at the institutional level, to determine whether the perceptions were congruent with the institutional developments.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Far-Right Populism and the Erosion of the Rule of Law

Far-right populism poses a particular challenge to the rule of law because its conception of popular sovereignty places the perceived will of the "real people" above institutional constraints and protections for political and social minorities. These populist movements of the far-right can come to power in competitive elections, then justify the weakening of institutions that limit the power of the Executive or pluralism itself. The erosion of democracy doesn't have to mean a permanent decision to stop holding elections or abandoning the constitutional system of government. Rather, in a step-by-step manner. In this process, "institutions are formally preserved, but their ability to be independent, impartial and hold those in power accountable is eroded over time.

Content analysis of the 29 KIIs identified four interrelated domains through which far-right populism was perceived to affect the rule of law and democratic institutions. These domains included weakening judicial independence, executive concentration of power, restrictions on minority rights, and constraints on media and freedom of expression, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below.

Table 1. The principal mechanisms linking far-right populism to Rule-of-Law and democratic erosion

Theme	Informants	Percentage
Weakening judicial independence	24	82.8%
Executive concentration of power	22	75.9%
Minority-rights restrictions	20	69.0%
Media restrictions	23	79.3%

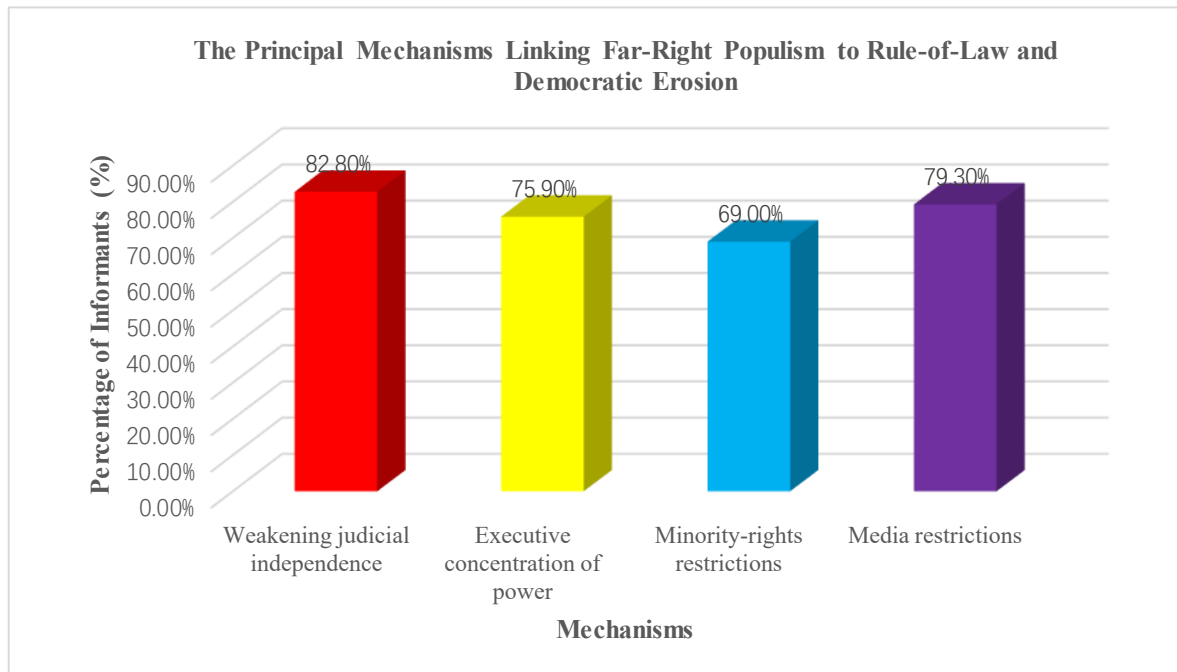


Figure 1. The principal mechanisms linking far-right populism to Rule-of-Law and democratic erosion

Source: Field Data

The following sub-sections examine each domain in turn and integrate KII findings with relevant secondary and case evidence.

3.1.1 Attacks on Judicial Independence

A central strategy of democratic erosion is the weakening of judicial independence. Of the 29 key informants interviewed in the study, 24 (82.8%) identified attacks on judicial independence as a significant mechanism through which far-right populism can undermine the rule of law. This was aptly put by an informant who pointed out that;

“Far-right populist governments appoint political loyalists to courts, alter judicial appointment procedures, reduce the authority of constitutional courts or disregard judgments that obstruct government priorities.” (Note 9)

The challenge is not limited to institutional restructuring depicted in the KII excerpt above. As Mazzoleni argues, radical right-wing populists question judicial autonomy by portraying independent judges as unelected actors who obstruct the sovereignty and will of the national “people.” (Note 10) Such criticism is not necessarily anti-democratic in itself because courts, like other institutions, should be legitimately be scrutinized. The problem arises when appeals to popular or national sovereignty are used to justify weakening the judiciary’s capacity to constrain public/executive power.

According to Magalhães and Garoupa, Hungary and Poland provide clearer European examples of right-wing/far-right populist democratic erosion through ostensibly legal institutional reforms (Note 11). In Hungary, Orbán’s government expanded and restructured the Constitutional Court, enabled the appointment of Fidesz-aligned judges, lowered judicial retirement ages and transferred powers to bodies under government influence. Further, in Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) government increased executive control over courts, replaced judicial elections to the National Council of the Judiciary with parliamentary selection, lowered Supreme Court judges’ retirement age and introduced disciplinary measures against judges. These cases demonstrate how the ideological

delegitimization of judicial constraints can be translated into institutional changes that increase political control over the judiciary. Thus, formal legality may be preserved while the substantive capacity of courts to provide independent checks on executive and legislative power is progressively weakened.

It is also worth mentioning that the significance of judicial independence extends beyond the judiciary itself. An independent court could function as a cross-cutting institutional safeguard by reviewing executive action, protecting constitutional rights and providing legal remedies where minorities or journalists face unlawful restrictions. On the flip side, when judicial autonomy is weakened, the institutional capacity to challenge executive concentration, discriminatory measures or restrictions on expression may also be reduced. The finding that 82.8% of informants identified judicial independence as a concern is therefore analytically relevant to the other mechanisms identified in Table 1. It suggests that institutional weakening in one domain can increase the vulnerability of other democratic safeguards without necessarily producing distinct forms of democratic backsliding.

3.1.2 Executive Aggrandizement

75.9% of the study's informants identified executive concentration of power as a mechanism through which far-right populism can undermine the rule of law and democratic institutions. This perception was reflected in the qualitative accounts, with one respondent observing that,

“Far-right populist leaders often present themselves as the direct voice of the people, and this can be used to justify concentrating authority in the executive. Institutions such as Parliament and the courts may then be portrayed as standing in the way of the people's mandate” (Note 12)

The account illustrates how populist appeals to popular sovereignty can legitimise the weakening of institutional constraints on executive authority. Given the purposive nature of the sample, the finding represents an informed perception among the interviewed experts rather than a population-level estimate. This finding is consistent with Bessen's argument. As per Bessen, executive aggrandizement occurs when executive arms of government constrain institutional checks and balances to their power (Note 13). Far-right populism can facilitate this process by portraying strong executive leadership as necessary to fulfil the will of the people, while depicting legislatures, courts and other checks as obstacles to that mandate. Bessen's multilevel analysis of survey data from 18 Latin American countries demonstrated this mechanism empirically: populist presidential discourse was associated with greater public support for presidents closing the Supreme Court or the Congress (Note 14). Thus, populism can create not only executive incentives for aggrandizement but also public tolerance for weakening institutional constraints.

Executive aggrandizement can occur through constitutional and legal reforms that formally preserve democratic procedures while concentrating authority in the executive. Italy under Giorgia Meloni illustrates this possibility. Bodini argued that the proposed *Premiership* reform would strengthen the Prime Minister's direct popular mandate while weakening parliamentary oversight and altering the relationship between Parliament and the executive; thereby creating a plebiscitarian form of populist constitutionalism (Note 15). The crucial issue is that these reforms would have enabled the executive to dominate the political system. However, the Italian case also demonstrates that executive aggrandizement is not inevitable. Baldini showed that institutional procedures, parliamentary dynamics, coalition politics and referendum requirements constrained and ultimately defeated important elements of the Meloni government's constitutional reform agenda (Note 16).

3.1.3 Undermining Minority Rights

Far right populism also has an exclusionary dimension. 69.0% of the study's key informants identified that far-right populism undermine the rule of law and democratic institutions by restricting minority rights. One informant explained that;

“Far-right populist politics tends to define the nation in narrow terms, presenting certain groups as outsiders or threats. Once a group is portrayed as not belonging to the ‘real people’, restricting its rights becomes easier to justify politically” (Note 17)

This account illustrates that majoritarian claims could transform political exclusion into differential protection under the law. Minority-rights restrictions are more consequential for the rule of law when institutions responsible for enforcing equality and constitutional rights become less independent, as shown in the previous section (Section 3.1.1-judicial independence) while concentrated executive authority can provide greater capacity to implement exclusionary policies. Minority exclusion can consequently operate both as an outcome of institutional weakening and as a mechanism through which majoritarian political legitimacy is reinforced. Therefore, minority-rights protection is a significant dimension of the rule-of-law risks associated with far-right populism.

Far-right populists frequently interpret an electoral victory as an unlimited mandate to govern according to the

preferences of the majority. This creates tension between popular sovereignty and constitutional democracy. In a liberal democracy, majority rule is constrained by rights that protect minorities, individuals and opposition groups. Yet, far-right populism challenges this principle when migrants, ethnic minorities, religious communities or sexual minorities are described as threats to national identity. Politics of such a sort devalues citizenship into a ranking of belonging. The “real people” are said to be the real nation and minorities are considered to be outsiders and whose rights are curtailed. This is a violation of the equality before the law and a violation of the constitutional principle of universal rights.

Hungary is a prime example of such a process with the government of Orbán, which adopted a restrictive stance on migration, as a result of which non-European migrants have been characterized as not being compatible with Hungary's cultural identity while “true refugees” are exclusively linked to fellow Europeans (Note 18). The same can be seen in Poland. Relocation quotas imposed by the EU have been opposed by the Polish government several times when it comes to migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. Czapnik and Mazurkiewicz demonstrated the radical right-wing construction of refugees as a threat to Polishness and Catholic identity, with particular emphasis on Muslims (Note 19). The same exclusionary reasoning also applied to LGBTQ+ communities: PiS projected them as a danger to traditional family and national morality, local authorities implemented “LGBT-free zones.” (Note 20) As illustrated in these cases, the erosion of minority rights starts not only by means of restrictive laws, but also by reconceptualizing who constitutes a legitimate member of “the people” and thus is entitled to equal protection and inclusion. This process demonstrates the interaction between rights exclusion and institutional change. On one hand, the political construction of minorities as outsiders generate support for restrictive measures. On the other hand, weakened institutional and media constraints can make such measures more difficult to contest, as discussed in detail in the following section.

3.1.4 Attacks on Media and Freedom of Expression

Independent media and freedom of expression is essential to democratic accountability as citizens need varying and credible information to hold governments to account. These freedoms are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both of which include the right to seek out, receive and share information and ideas. These guarantees allow for independent media reporting of public power, where this is essential for democratic systems, in order to allow for informed political engagement. This function is in danger from far-right populist rhetoric, which casts critical media as “corrupt” or “deceptive” “elite” or “other people” against which independent journalism and certain news outlets are conceived as being opposed to the interests of the “real people”. This delegitimization can lead to the political justification of regulatory controls, pressure on finances, selective application of media laws, and the concentration of ownership.

29 respondents (79.3%) identified restrictions on media and freedom of expression as a mechanism through which far-right populism can undermine the rule of law and democratic institutions. One respondent observed that;

“Far-right populists generally depict critical journalists as 'enemies of the people', especially when they question the government's agenda.” This can make it difficult for journalists to investigate or even challenge the authority.”
(Note 21)

The account shows how the restriction of free speech can go beyond formal censorship to delegitimization, intimidation and the setting up of conditions for self-censorship. Media restrictions contravene independent journalism which constitutes an external accountability mechanism across the other dimensions (undermining minority rights, executive overreach and attacks on judicial independence) identified in the study. When journalists can investigate executive conduct, judicial changes, discriminatory policies, they can expose developments occurring across several areas simultaneously. Conversely, when critical media are delegitimised or constrained, such violations become less accessible to the public. Restrictions on independent media could further reduce the visibility of discriminatory practices by limiting the capacity of affected groups, journalists and civil-society actors to contest dominant political narratives. Tare mentioned attacks on journalists and unfriendly political climate as methods that can result in a chilling effect – meaning journalists will be self-censoring to avoid such attacks and consequently reduce critical reporting (Note 22). This process is important as the 2026 V-Dem data indicates that freedom of expression also declined in 44 countries in the last decade (Note 23). So, in addition to formal censorship, there is a succession of processes in which delegitimization leads to institutional control, and hostility with journalists to discourage critical investigation. When independent information is eclipsed, the governments' power to shape public narratives, cover up wrongdoing, and represent political criticism as disloyalty is enhanced. Therefore, media restrictions can have a multiplier effect: they do not constitute only an independent restriction on expression but may also weaken one of the mechanisms through which citizens, opposition groups and civil society monitor the judiciary and executive and contest restrictions affecting minority groups.

3.1.5 Interaction Among the Mechanisms of Democratic Erosion

The findings of the previous four subsections (3.1.1 - 3.1.4) suggest that the four mechanisms that the informants identified can be analytically linked together as forms of democratic erosion and are not mutually exclusive. The pattern may be considered as an iterative institutionalisation process. Concentrated power in the executive may undermine judicial accountability, and tighten the ability of the judiciary to assert themselves against the executive and/or to safeguard constitutional rights, while a lack of judicial independence can affect the capacity of the judiciary to contest executive decisions and/or to defend constitutional rights. The institutional context created could also be conducive to restrictions that impact minorities, especially if policies and norms restrict political participation among groups deemed as not part of the legitimate political community. Meanwhile, limitations on independent media may limit the public's ability to hold these developments on institutional and rights issues to account. The interaction can accordingly be multidirectional. Executive aggrandizement can also lead to institutional and rights restrictions; weakening judicial independence can limit the ability of legal challenges to challenge these restrictions; exclusion of minorities can boost the power of majoritarian political narratives to justify a concentration of authority; and the restrictions on the media can lower the transparency of the entire process. This does not imply that there is necessarily a causal sequence between the four mechanisms as presented in the KII data. Instead, the qualitative evidence suggests that informants saw a variety of aspects of the erosion of democracy taking place in the same political-institutional setting.

The relatively high percentages for each of these four themes (judicial independence: 82.8%, media restrictions: 79.3%, executive concentration: 75.9%, and minority-rights restrictions: 69.0%) suggest that respondents were not only concerned about one indicator of democratic erosion. The results thus validate a multi-faceted concept of democratic backsliding in which institutional accountability, minority protection and freedom of expression are all interconnected aspects of the rule of law. The cases of Hungary, Poland and Italy further demonstrated that these mechanisms do not necessarily develop to the same extent or follow an identical trajectory. The Italian evidence, in particular, showed how institutional processes and political limits can impede proposed shifts in the allocation of executive power. Findings should therefore be understood as mechanisms and relationships through which democratic erosion could happen.

The comparative evidence from Hungary, Poland and Italy further clarified the interaction found in the KII findings. The three cases represent different configurations of the ways in which populist political projects engage with democratic institutions, as well as being illustrative of the mechanisms common to the present study. Hungary and Poland provided evidence of more sustained institutional contestation. On the other hand, Italy demonstrated the power of political constraints that limit suggested institutional modifications. The cases therefore demonstrate both the presence of common mechanisms and variation in their institutional consequences.

This comparative analysis relates the findings of the study to the international literature on democratic backsliding. The cases are not representative of all far-right populist governments in general, and the qualitative evidence does not prove there was a universal causal sequence. Instead, the 29 interviews offer some indication of the ways that informants feel democracy is being eroded. The cross-national cases show that similar mechanisms have been reported in other European political settings. The comparison of evidence therefore provides further support for the interpretation of the KII findings, but does not provide statistical generalisability. The appropriate form of generalisation is consequently analytical; not statistical.

3.2 Counterarguments

The argument that democracy is in decline should not be accepted without considering alternative interpretations. One perspective holds that democracy may be adapting rather than collapsing, as polarization, institutional contestation and criticism of established elites can also be normal features of democratic politics. From this perspective, populist movements may perform a corrective function by mobilizing citizens who feel excluded from mainstream politics and bringing neglected grievances into public debate. This is supported, with important qualifications, by Huber and Ruth, whose analysis of 31 European countries found that populist parties can increase electoral participation and, particularly among right-wing populist parties, improve equality of participation across income and education groups (Note 24). Their findings, however, show that these effects depend substantially on the party's host ideology and whether it is in government or opposition.

This qualification is important when considering the experiences of Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and Brothers of Italy in Italy. Their electoral success can be interpreted partly as evidence of representational failures within established political systems, including dissatisfaction with political elites and the perceived neglect of particular social groups. However, greater political mobilization does not necessarily produce stronger democratic representation. In right-wing populist parties, Huber and Ruth determined that lower-income groups could be mobilized by undermining the existing elites, but that was not always accompanied by an increase in congruence in ideology between citizens and parliamentary representatives (Note 25). As such, populism can uncover real issues in democracy and expand democratic participation, but also pose threats to democratic competition and

pluralistic institutions.

The nature of these counterarguments indicates that far-right populism is not always a threat to democracy. But democratic competition becomes dangerous when politicians refuse to accept any legal and democratic limitations, when they dismiss the legitimacy of their opponents, when they turn short-term governmental majority into a sense of unlimited power. Evidence from comparative research indicates that populist governments generally have more damaging effects on liberal democracy and democratic contestation than their potentially corrective effects on representation (Note 26). Therefore, populism could expose genuine democratic failures, but far-right populist rule threatens democracy when it converts popular dissatisfaction into attacks on pluralism, rights and institutional accountability.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between the rule of law, far-right populism and the condition of global democracy. The analysis revealed four ways in which far-right populist movements can undermine the democratic process: through attacks on judicial independence, through executive aggrandizement, by violating the rights of minority groups and by attacking media and freedom of expression. Ultimately, far-right populist leaders are concealing institutional and constitutional limits on the power of the people as barriers to popular sovereignty. However, far-right populism doesn't always end democracy right away. The threat it poses is more serious in failing to strengthen democratic institutions from their core. Elections are held, courts continue to function and laws continue to be made, but over time the true hallmark of constitutional democracy – independence, equality and accountability – erodes. Therefore, the relationship between far-right populism and democratic backsliding is a gradual and multidimensional process. The erosion may occur incrementally as institutional independence, minority protection, executive accountability and media freedom are weakened.

Comparative cases from Hungary, Poland and Italy demonstrated that these processes are neither uniform nor inevitable. Hungary and Poland illustrated how institutional contestation, executive power and exclusionary politics interact within established democratic systems. Italy on the other hand, provided a contrasting case in which parliamentary, constitutional and political constraints have limited proposed institutional changes. These cases therefore support analytical as opposed to statistical generalisation. They demonstrate that the mechanisms identified in the study have broader comparative relevance while also showing that their effects are shaped by national institutional arrangements and the resilience of democratic checks and balances.

In summary, democracy is under great strain, but it has not vanished worldwide and its downfall is not inevitable. Far-right populism might reveal the imperfection of representation and governance. But it lags on challenging the limits of the law and replacing election victories with “mandate” of unlimited authority. For the concept of defending democratic gains, this study provides a framework other than the defense of the election. On the contrary, it must include independent judiciaries and free media, checks and balances on the authority of the executive, and constitutional rights for minorities. In sum, democracy can only survive if popular power is placed under the rule of law.

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Notes

Note 1. Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, 'What Is Democracy, and Why Does Defending It Matter?' (Freedom House, 2024). <<https://freedomhouse.org/article/what-democracy-and-why-does-defending-it-matter> > accessed 21 August 2026

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