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The Populist Challenge

Democracy and Its Enemies

*Edited by Masaya Kobayashi,
Jiro Mizushima and Hikari Ishido*



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Edited by Masaya Kobayashi, Jiro Mizushima and Hikari Ishido

Contributors

Andrei Țăranu, Cristian Pirvulescu, Heroe Waskito, Hikari Ishido, Hirotaka Ishikawa, Isnaini Muallidin, Jiro Mizushima, Maria Luisa Nabinger de Almeida, Masaya Kobayashi, Masaya Kobayashi, Oana I. Armeanu

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The social sciences, as a form of scientific knowledge anchored on epistemological foundations, theories, and specific methodologies, both in their fundamental and applied dimensions, are paramount for understanding and, consequently, developing instruments that contribute to improving social and environmental living conditions. This Social Sciences book series, based on the concept of the social sciences as key elements in the promotion of scientific knowledge and its inherent consequences, has as its primary goal to be a space for the dissemination of relevant information on various objects of study, aimed at specialists, students, policymakers, and others interested in the challenges facing humanity. Thus, the aim is to promote scientific progress through the sound and rigorous dissemination of studies that, from the perspective of the social sciences, either through a specialised disciplinary approach or through interdisciplinary perspectives, foster a deeper understanding of the objects under analysis, clarifying the issues addressed and their implications.

Meet the Series Editor



Sandro Nuno Ferreira de Serpa (PhD, FRSA, FRSS, FRGS, FRSPH, FRAI, FISDS, GLO Fellow), is an Associate Professor with tenure in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Azores and a Senior Integrated Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences (CICS.NOVA.UAc). With over 25 years of experience in higher education, in 2025 Dr. Serpa is ranked by ScholarGPS as the 8th scholar worldwide in Sociology (Prior 5-Year category) and 1st in Portugal. His career is distinguished by encompassing over 400 scientific publications published in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America with a high research impact, as evidenced by a Google Scholar h-index of 29 and a Scopus h-index of 14 (with 79 documents indexed). His international prestige is underscored by his status as a Fellow of five distinguished British Royal Societies: the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), the Royal Statistical Society (FRSS), the Royal Geographical Society (FRGS), the Royal Society for Public Health (FRSPH), and the Royal Anthropological Institute (FRAI), alongside being a Fellow of the International Society for Development and Sustainability (FISDS) and Fellow of the Global Labor Organization (GLO). Registered Vetted Expert for the European Commission and the United Nations. Dr. Serpa's research focuses on the sociotechnological co-evolution of Society 5.0, Artificial Intelligence in Education, and Algocratic Governance. An expert in strategic editorial leadership, he currently serves as the Series Editor for Social Sciences Series at IntechOpen, Editor for SAGE Open, and is a member of the Editorial Board for International Studies in Sociology of Education (Taylor & Francis) and Societies (MDPI). His extensive administrative background includes roles as Department Head, Degree Director, and Deputy Director of CICS.UAc, reflecting a profile that harmonizes scientific excellence with high-level academic management.

Meet the Volume Editors



Masaya Kobayashi is Professor of Political Philosophy, Public Philosophy, and Comparative Politics at Chiba University in Japan. He is Director of the Japanese Positive Health Psychology Society and heads the university's Research Center on Public Affairs. After graduating from the University of Tokyo Faculty of Law, he worked there as a research fellow. He later became a visiting scholar and Bye-Fellow at the University of Cambridge. His research spans political philosophy, positive psychology, comparative politics, public policy, and comparative thought, with a recent focus on links between philosophy and positive psychology. He has published widely in Japanese and English and often comments on politics in the media.



After earning his BA from the University of Tokyo in 1990, Jiro Mizushima pursued graduate studies in comparative European politics and Dutch politics at the University of Tokyo. From 1994 to 1995, he was a visiting scholar at Leiden University's Faculty of Social Sciences. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Tokyo in 1999. His academic career began in 1998 as an associate professor at Konan University in Kobe. In 2003, he moved to Chiba University, where he is now a professor at the Graduate School of Social Sciences. He has published extensively on Dutch politics, populism, Christian democracy, Amsterdam's modern history, the welfare state, migration, and ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, including books such as *What is Populism?* and *The Hidden House and the Square*.



Hikari Ishido is Professor of International Economics at Chiba University's Graduate School of Global and Transdisciplinary Studies and Director of the APEC Study Center in the Faculty of Law and Economics. He holds BA and BSc degrees from the University of Tokyo and MSc and Ph.D. degrees in economics from the University of London. He previously worked for UNDP and the Institute of Developing Economies at JETRO. Within APEC, he serves as an expert on trade and investment. He has lectured at international organizations such as the United Nations, ERIA, and PECC, and has published widely on theoretical and empirical issues in international trade and investment. He also serves as the Secretariat of the APEC Study Center Japan research network.

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Preface

This volume, *The Populist Challenge – Democracy and Its Enemies*, addresses one of the most pressing political questions of our time: the transformation, and possible reconstitution, of democracy under contemporary populism. Across diverse regions, democratic regimes are not merely experiencing episodic crises but are undergoing structural transformations that challenge their institutional coherence, moral foundations, and even viability. In this sense, the “challenge” of populism is not simply political but civilizational, calling into question the viability of democracy itself in the twenty-first century.

The subtitle, *Democracy and Its Enemies*, consciously evokes Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in the final year of World War II. However, the present volume departs from Popper’s classical formulation in a decisive respect. Whereas Popper identified the enemies of the open society as ideological forces, totalitarianism and fascism, typically seen in external countries, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the contemporary condition in democracies reveals a more troubling paradox. Today, the adversaries of democracy frequently arise from within formally democratic countries, even in the very historical heartlands of democracy, mobilizing popular legitimacy while eroding liberal-democratic norms. Most strikingly, the United States, long regarded as a central pillar of the liberal international order, has, under the rise of populist leadership exemplified by Donald Trump, exhibited tendencies that blur the boundary between defender and challenger of the open society, at times, approaching competitive authoritarianism. This inversion marks a profound transformation in the global political landscape.

Moreover, the contemporary resurgence of authoritarian populism is no longer confined to institutional or ideological domains but is increasingly entangled with geopolitical conflict. The re-emergence of large-scale war, including ongoing wars and conflicts in the Middle East and beyond, underscores the extent to which populist-authoritarian dynamics are linked to the dynamics of international tensions.

In this regard, the present moment invites comparison with the conditions preceding the two World Wars. While historical analogies must be drawn with caution, the convergence of authoritarian consolidation, ideological polarization, and international instability suggests that the structural affinities with the earlier periods are not merely superficial. What distinguishes the present, however, is that these dynamics unfold within formally democratic systems, thereby intensifying their internal contradictions.

To capture this complex configuration, Chapter 1, *Populism Typology across Europe, the United States, and Japan: Still the Century of Hybrid Fascism?* develops a comprehensive typology of populism across Europe, the United States, and Japan. It analyzes the

expansion of both left- and right-wing populism, the rise of welfare chauvinism, the increasing salience of religious identity, and the emergence of outsider politics. A central argument is that contemporary populism is sometimes characterized by the fusion of outsider populist mobilization with insider institutional power. This fusion produces what may be termed hybrid populism, which, in its more advanced forms, evolves into hybrid authoritarianism or even hybrid fascism. Importantly, this process is not purely institutional but also symbolic and affective. The chapter highlights the role of religious and quasi-religious dimensions in structuring political identification, a theme that recurs throughout the volume.

Indeed, the religious dimension of contemporary populism emerges as a key thread connecting the first four chapters and the final chapter. In these cases, populist movements draw upon narratives of civilizational or cultural identity, moral purification, and collective destiny that resonate with religious imaginaries. This is particularly evident in the context of recent geopolitical conflicts, where the authoritarian religious dimension of American populism has been sharply illuminated. Such developments suggest that the boundary between political and religious forms of mobilization is increasingly porous, reinforcing the intensity and durability of populist movements.

The volume is structured as a dynamic progression that traces the trajectory of contemporary democracy from crisis to potential renewal. It begins with the comparative diagnosis of democratic crisis (Chapter 1), proceeds to cases of democratic impasse where institutions persist but are increasingly constrained (Section I: *Democracy's Impasse beyond the West*), advances to cases of more pronounced democratic erosion and illiberal transformation (Section II: *Democracy and Illiberal Transformation*), and culminates in a theoretical and normative exploration of populism and democratic reconstruction (Section III: *Populism and the Renewal of Democracy*). This progression reflects not only a geographic variation but also a conceptual movement from diagnosis to reconstruction.

Section I, *Democracy's Impasse beyond the West: Populism in Asia*, examines contexts in which democracy has not collapsed but instead exhibits structural stagnation and tension. Chapter 2, *Japan's 2025 Populist Turn from Outside: Multi-Dimensional Well-Being and Value Depletion in Integrative Political Psychology*, presents a political-psychological analysis of Japan's 2025 populist turn, demonstrating how declining well-being and value depletion contribute to the formation of populist attitudes and the rise of populist parties. Chapter 3, *Populism in Post-Reform Democracy: Challenges and Political Dynamics in Indonesia*, explores Indonesia in the post-Suharto democratic era, marked by authoritarian legacies, highlighting how populism interacts with religious and political dynamics, particularly the tension between political participation and institutional checks and balances.

Section II, *Democracy and Illiberal Transformation: Populism in Central and Eastern Europe*, addresses cases of democratic erosion that have progressed further in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary and Poland. Chapter 4, *Perspectives on the 2024–2025 Presidential Elections in Romania*, analyzes the 2024–2025 presidential elections, focusing on support for far-right candidates and illustrating how electoral competition reveals the fragility and resilience of democracy in a deeply divided society.

Chapter 5, *From Populism to Illiberalism: How Central and Eastern European Countries Fell into the Illiberal Trap*, provides a broader analysis of Central and Eastern Europe, tracing how populist movements, driven by factors including religious identity politics, contribute to the hollowing out of democratic institutions and the consolidation of illiberal regimes.

Section III, *Populism and the Renewal of Democracy: Theoretical and Normative Perspectives*, develops the volume's conceptual and theoretical core, building on the introductory chapter. Chapter 6, *Perspective Chapter: Populism and Democracy – Corruption as an Enemy*, examines the tension between Latin American populism and democracy, especially in Brazil and Argentina, from the perspective of radical democracy, identifying corruption as a true enemy of both. Although not explicitly indicated in the section titles, Latin America, where populism was first extensively theorized, is addressed in this chapter from a theoretical perspective. This inclusion ensures that the volume maintains a truly global scope, covering Western, central, and Eastern Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and encompasses both the historical origins and contemporary transformations of populism.

Chapter 7, *Beyond Populism: A Moral-Existential Theory of Civic Sacredness for Flourishing Democracy*, advances a normative framework for democratic reconstruction. At the heart of this reconstruction lies the concept of civic sacredness, in contrast to authoritarian forms of sacredness that underpin exclusionary and hierarchical orders. Building on this distinction, this chapter explicitly revises Popperian open society by proposing an eternal movement of multi-dimensional democracy oriented toward human flourishing. This framework, referred to as Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD), or flourishing democracy, seeks to overcome the limitations of post-Popperian liberalism by reintroducing ethical good and communal life into liberal democracy. In this sense, democracy is redefined not merely as a procedural system but as a moral–existential project grounded in the conditions of human flourishing.

The volume's concluding perspective thus points toward democratic renewal. It argues that the populist challenge cannot be addressed through institutional reform alone but requires a reconfiguration of the ethical and existential foundations of political life.

A defining feature of this book is its integrative orientation. It brings together structural, experiential, and normative dimensions of political inquiry, illuminating the interplay between institutions and identities, power, well-being, and meaning. By integrating comparative political analysis, empirical political psychology, and political or public philosophy, this volume offers a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework for understanding both the crisis and the future of democracy.

This multi-perspectival approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the populist challenge, capturing both its structural causes and its subjective dimensions. In doing so, the volume seeks to bridge the gap between empirical and normative approaches in contemporary political science. Thus, it seeks not only to analyze the populist challenge but also to reopen the question of what democracy ought to be.

The editors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all contributors for their intellectual rigor and collaboration. We are also indebted to the publisher for their support throughout the preparation of this volume. We hope that this work will contribute to a deeper understanding of the contemporary crisis of democracy and to the exploration of pathways toward its renewal.

Masaya Kobayashi and Jiro Mizushima

Graduate School of Social Sciences,
Chiba University,
Chiba City, Japan

Hikari Ishido

Graduate School of Global and Transdisciplinary Studies,
Chiba University,
Chiba City, Japan

Section 1

Democracy's Impasse beyond
the West: Populism in Asia

Chapter 1

Populism Typology across Europe, the United States, and Japan: Still the Century of Hybrid Fascism?

Masaya Kobayashi and Jiro Mizushima

Abstract

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of contemporary populism across Europe, the United States, and Japan, highlighting the interaction between outsider mobilization and insider-driven authoritarian tendencies as the core dynamic of the global populist turn. Moreover, it examines whether the interaction of ideological echoes and insider-outsider hybridization warrants reconsidering fascism not as a historical recurrence but as a transformed, hybrid analytical category in contemporary democratic politics. In Europe, immigration and refugee pressures enabled the rapid expansion of right-wing outsider populist parties, normalizing welfare chauvinism and civilizational Christian identity politics. In the United States, outsider populism penetrated the Republican Party, where evangelical networks and Catholic post-liberalism reshaped the party from within, producing an insider-outsider hybrid that facilitated democratic erosion under the Trump administrations. Japan, long considered a deviant case, experienced a nationwide surge of outsider populism in 2024–2025, while Shinto-inflected cultural nationalism continued to sustain elite-driven insider populism. The result is a vertically fused hybrid configuration reminiscent of prewar “fascism from above” interacting with bottom-up extremism. Across the three regions, religion or quasi-religion operates as a symbolic and organizational reservoir for political mobilization, though taking distinct institutional forms. By synthesizing Mizushima’s outsider-politics theory, Maruyama’s classical typology of “fascism from above/below,” and emerging theories of hybrid authoritarianism, the chapter identifies shared mechanisms of democratic backsliding and offers a new typology of populist politics and hybrid authoritarian formations in advanced democracies.

Keywords: populism, outsider mobilization, insider authoritarianism, democratic erosion, hybrid political forms, role of religion

1. Introduction

Contemporary politics has entered what many scholars describe as a *global populist turn* [1, 2]. Across advanced democracies, political systems have been reshaped by converging forces: anti-establishment sentiment, identity-based polarization, the rise of outsider candidates, and widespread distrust of traditional institutions [3].

Following Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's widely cited definition of populism as a *thin-centered ideology* contrasting a "pure people" with a "corrupt elite," this chapter adopts Jiro Mizushima's definition of populism as "a radical political movement that understands established politics as the monopoly of a corrupt elite, sets against this the pure will of the people, positions itself as the representative of that will, and criticizes established politics and established parties" [1, 4].

This definition highlights populism not only as anti-elitism or xenophobia but also as a political mobilization rooted in cultural backlash against changing value systems [2]. Populist movements campaign against established parties, immigration, Islamization, globalization, and free-trade regimes; cultivate support from groups who feel excluded from politics; and criticize vested interests in the name of "the people" [5].

In Europe, the immigration and refugee issue accelerated the rise of radical right populist parties from the 2010s, enabling some to enter government (Italy) or threaten centrist dominance (France, the United Kingdom) [6]. In the Americas, populist-oriented presidents were elected—Trump in the United States, López Obrador in Mexico, and Bolsonaro in Brazil. In the United States, the fusion of the religious right with post-liberal anti-democratic currents transformed the internal structure of the Republican Party [7]. Even Japan—long regarded as insulated from such dynamics—experienced a nationwide surge of outsider populism in the 2024–2025 electoral cycle.

Therefore, this chapter begins with Europe, where these dynamics first intensified, and uses it as a reference point to compare the United States and Japan. For Japan, the analysis draws on the 2025 national election examined in Chapter "Japan's 2025 Populist Turn from Outside".

1.1 Analytical perspective: Outsider/insider dynamics and the religious dimension

Europe has seen the electoral mainstreaming of radical right parties; the United States has undergone an internal populist transformation of a major party; and Japan has experienced an unprecedented rise of outsider challenger parties. These developments indicate that populism has become a structural challenge shared across democracies [8].

A particularly striking feature of this global transformation is its religious or quasi-religious dimension. Contrary to earlier theories predicting secularization, contemporary populist movements—from European cultural Christianity to American evangelicalism and White Christian Nationalism to Shinto-inflected cultural nationalism in Japan—demonstrate that religion remains a central reservoir for symbolic boundary-making and political mobilization [7, 9].

Simultaneously, the erosion of intermediary organizations—labor unions, mass-membership parties, and religious associations—has created a political environment in which outsider politics can flourish. Yet insider actors have not disappeared; instead, they increasingly appropriate populist rhetoric to preserve dominance. Thus, populism today emerges from the dynamic interaction between *outsider populism* and *insider populism*, a relationship insufficiently theorized in global scholarship.

1.2 Why comparative? Reassessing Europe, the United States, and Japan

Despite the rapid expansion of research on populism, existing scholarship remains disproportionately Eurocentric. Leading frameworks—thin-centered ideology [1],

cultural backlash [2], and national populism [3]—were developed primarily through European cases. These frameworks leave key questions underexplored:

- How does institutionalized religious mobilization reshape party competition (USA)?
- How do civilizational identity claims—cultural Christianity or Shinto nationalism—structure conflict?
- Why did Japan experience a sudden nationwide rise of outsider populism in 2024–2025?
- How do insider and outsider populism interact across institutional contexts?
- How does democratic backsliding occur *within* democratic institutions instead of via regime replacement [10–12]?

A comparative analysis clarifies region-specific pathways and structural commonalities, situating Japan within a genuinely global context rather than treating it as exceptional.

1.3 Positioning within international literature

Although global research has advanced, conceptual gaps remain regarding the religious dimension, insider–outsider interactions, and democratic erosion. Mizushima’s concept of “Outsider Politics” [4] represents a significant but under-recognized contribution in English-language scholarship. Building on this, the chapter incorporates Masao Maruyama’s influential distinction between “Fascism from Above” and “Fascism from Below” [13], using it to conceptualize insider populism—top-down mobilization by dominant-party elites.

Extending these arguments, the chapter introduces the notion of Hybrid Authoritarianism, describing cases where outsider mobilization and insider-led centralization interact to produce democratic backsliding. This synthesizes developments in Europe, the U.S., and Japan, expanding international debates concerning democracy and autocratization [14].

Contemporary populism has become a defining feature of political competition across advanced democracies, yet its relationship to authoritarianism remains theoretically unsettled. While populism is often treated either as a democratic corrective or as a transient protest phenomenon, recent developments in Europe, the United States, and Japan suggest the emergence of more durable and institutionally embedded configurations. This chapter does not argue that contemporary populism constitutes a return to historical fascism. Instead, it asks whether certain ideological echoes—when combined with the hybridization of outsider mobilization and insider-led governance—justify revisiting the question of fascism in a transformed and hybrid form. Through this framework, the chapter seeks to clarify how contemporary populism can hollow out the substantive content of democratic institutions without abandoning their formal structures, raising the question of whether we are witnessing a new, hybridized variant of authoritarian politics rather than a simple repetition of past regimes. This chapter provisionally employs the concept of hybrid authoritarianism, while the notion of ‘hybrid fascism’ is introduced later as a heuristic refinement.

1.4 Structure of the chapter

Beginning with Europe (Section 2), the chapter extracts four core features and compares the United States and Japan (Sections 3 and 4):

1. Expansion of left- and right-wing populism
2. Welfare chauvinism
3. Religious identity
4. Outsider politics

Section 5 highlights differences in these dimensions and proposes a typology. The chapter contributes by the following:

1. Systematically comparing populism across regions
2. Analyzing the religious dimension
3. Reinterpreting Japanese populism as a hybrid variant
4. Developing a typology based on insider/outsider dynamics
5. Proposing the heuristic concept of Hybrid Authoritarianism/Fascism for examining contemporary populism from a historical perspective

The “enemies of democracy” refer not only to authoritarianism or totalitarianism but also to hybrid regimes in which authoritarian dynamics advance internally [10, 11]. By tracing the trajectories of three regions, the chapter develops a framework for understanding emerging forms of new authoritarianism and hybrid fascism.

2. Europe: Welfare chauvinism, outsider politics, and religious identity

2.1 The expansion of left- and right-wing populism

A striking feature of contemporary European politics is the decline of mainstream parties and the expansion of both left-wing and right-wing populist parties. Established parties that once played central roles across national political systems have declined regardless of ideological orientation. Meanwhile, radical populist parties and outsider politicians—who foreground anti-establishment and anti-mainstream politics—have significantly expanded their support, in some cases even winning governmental power.

As shown in **Figure 1**, populist parties that had remained marginal until the 2000s expanded their support across countries during the 2010s, both on the left and the right. By the 2020s, they collectively reached nearly 30% of the vote share.

Although right-wing and left-wing populists frequently take opposing positions on issues such as immigration and refugee policy, wealth taxation, and responses to

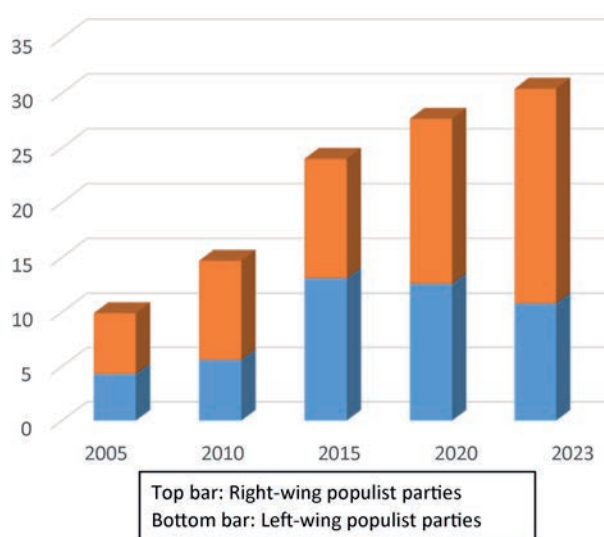


Figure 1.
 Average vote share (%) of populist parties in eight continental European countries.

the Gaza conflict, they nonetheless share several essential features. First, both adopt an anti-establishment stance, rejecting mainstream parties and politics and calling for radical reform. Second, as one commentator puts it, both advance “patriotic” claims. Populism, across both left and right, tends toward nationalism.

That right-wing populists are “patriotic” is self-evident: they often deploy national symbols such as flags and anthems, praise “national traditions,” and advocate the exclusion of immigrants and refugees under the banner of putting their own nation first. What is more interesting, however, is that left-wing populists are no less “patriotic” in that they also place “their own people” first. For left-wing populists, established left parties, especially social democratic parties, have become complicit in global capitalism and neoliberalism, betraying the working classes of their own nations. From their perspective, the workers and vulnerable populations of their own country ought to be prioritized, and the political elites who obediently accept globalization or follow EU bureaucrats become enemies of the people, regardless of left or right. Thus, left-wing populist claims gravitate toward nationalism. To varying degrees, populists on both sides are critical of globalization, skeptical of EU integration, and nationalist insofar as they prioritize “their own nationals.”

In this sense, as in contemporary Japan (discussed later), both extremes of the ideological spectrum—left-wing and right-wing populists—are growing in support, squeezing the centrist mainstream parties from both sides.

2.2 Right-wing populism and welfare chauvinism

Next, special attention should be given to right-wing populist parties, whose expansion in recent years has been particularly remarkable.

Right-wing populist parties in which champion anti-immigrant and anti-refugee positions have surged to become rivals—or even surpass—established major parties in many countries. In France, Marine Le Pen advanced to the final round of the 2022

presidential election, securing over 40% of the vote. In Germany, AfD (Alternative for Germany) rose to become the second-largest party in the 2025 federal election. In Italy, *Brothers of Italy* became the largest party in the 2022 election, leading to Giorgia Meloni's premiership. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats rose to the second-largest party and entered government through external cooperation. In the Netherlands, the right-wing populist Freedom Party became the largest party in the 2023 general election and formed a coalition government in 2024. In Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, and other small and mid-sized countries, right-wing populists have similarly expanded and, in many cases, reached governmental power. In Central and Eastern Europe, EU-skeptical right-wing leaders and parties have gained significant support, generating discord within the EU over issues such as support for Ukraine. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has held power for more than 10 years, violating the rule of law and strengthening xenophobic policies, almost becoming the opposition party within the EU. In Romania, an unknown right-wing outsider came first in the initial round of the 2024 presidential election, generating shock. Even though it has not yet secured large numbers of seats at the national level, the United Kingdom has seen the Reform UK Party, led by Nigel Farage—the “architect” of Brexit—emerge as the largest party in the 2025 local elections. Riding on the unpopularity of both Labour and the Conservatives, it now enjoys the highest polling numbers in the country. It is expected to become the “eye of the storm” in the next general election, causing deep anxiety within the governing Labour Party.

These new right-wing populist parties place on the agenda topics that established parties struggle to address—immigration and refugees, EU integration, and globalization—issues that can broadly be characterized as “national” themes. While stirring dissatisfaction with existing politics, they criticize established parties in sweeping terms, call for resistance to globalization, demand stricter regulations on immigrants and refugees, advocate limiting the rights of foreigners, and call for halting further EU integration. That such openly nationalist parties have become mainstream represents an unprecedented development in postwar European politics.

What is especially noteworthy is that right-wing populist parties, despite their diverse origins, appear to be converging, albeit with national variations, on what political science terms *welfare chauvinism*, which seems to be a significant factor behind their electoral successes.

Welfare chauvinism can be broadly defined as a stance that prioritizes “the welfare of one’s own nationals” while calling for the exclusion of immigrants, refugees, and foreigners. Traditionally, “the right” has tended to align with market-oriented policies and to adopt anti-welfare-state positions. Right-wing populists, however, differ from conventional right-wing actors in that they emphasize the living conditions of their own nationals and seek support particularly among the lower and middle classes. In recent years, amid inflation, rising living costs, soaring rents, and housing shortages, they have advanced the claim that “the government and mainstream parties neglect the welfare and housing needs of nationals while providing generous protection and housing guarantees to immigrants and refugees,” which has attracted significant support.

This combination of “exclusion” and “welfare”—a policy package that mixes elements traditionally associated with both “right” and “left”—has strong appeal among voters dissatisfied with established parties and has contributed substantially to the electoral success of these groups. Hence, welfare chauvinism has come to be called a “winning formula.”

2.3 The age of ‘religious identity’?

Another noteworthy aspect concerns the relationship between populism and religiosity.

Although modern technology has advanced beyond expectations and AI now appears to surpass human cognition, contemporary political leaders display a surprising degree of “religiosity.” The leaders of the world’s two major military powers—the United States and Russia—namely, President Trump and President Putin, are both self-professed Christians. Trump is affiliated with Protestant churches, while Putin is a believer in the Russian Orthodox Church; both publicly emphasize Christian values (regardless of their private convictions). In countries where Christians constitute a large share of the population, demonstrating a commitment to Christianity in national governance can enhance political legitimacy.

In Europe as well, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, is Catholic. Most European leaders, including Germany’s Chancellor Merz, are Christian. Even in contemporary Europe—often perceived as secular and liberal—Christianity remains an essential source of identity among political elites. Notably, Japan’s former Prime Minister Ishiba is also a Protestant (Presbyterian), meaning that during his tenure the top national leaders of Japan, the United States, Europe, and Russia were all publicly acknowledged Christians—an exceptionally rare phenomenon in world history (though not unprecedented).

Beyond Christianity, many of today’s globally influential leaders—such as Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu and India’s Prime Minister Modi—are devout adherents of Judaism and Hinduism, respectively.

Thus, many contemporary “strongmen”—figures who shape global politics, such as Trump, Putin, Netanyahu, and Modi—possess strong “religious identities.” Moreover, they do not confine their faith to their personal inner life but appear to pursue forms of national integration grounded in religion. Paradoxically, in the secular and technologically advanced twenty-first century, religious identity—often regarded as premodern—appears to be increasingly expected to serve as an essential mechanism for national unity.

2.4 From ‘religious organizations’ to ‘religious identity’

Considering the recent rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the issue of religious identity is of critical importance.

During the twentieth century—especially its latter half—Christian democratic parties held dominant positions in many western European countries. In West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, and France (Fourth Republic), Christian democratic parties repeatedly entered government and often served as the largest party, producing prime ministers. Their support base rested on extensive Christian organizational networks—associations of believers, youth organizations, Christian labor unions, Christian farmers’ associations, and other groups that mobilized the faithful and delivered electoral victories.

Religious organizations supported Christian democratic parties, and these parties, in turn, governed as ruling parties. This was one of the central pillars of postwar European politics.

However, in recent years, close cooperation between religious organizations and mainstream parties has diminished—much like in Japan. As secularization and church disengagement have progressed in Europe, particularly among younger generations, the number of Christian believers has steadily declined. Correspondingly, faith-based

associations, Christian labor unions, women's groups, and youth organizations have lost strength. Christian democratic parties, which depended on these groups as their support base, have declined in most countries except a few such as Germany.

Yet the weakening of organized religion does not diminish religion's role as an anchor of "religious identity." Since the early twenty-first century, especially after the 9/11 attacks, Islamic extremism has attracted global attention, and issues surrounding Muslim immigrants and refugees have become increasingly salient in Europe. As Islam has come to be perceived as incompatible with "Western society," the counter-image of "Christian identity" as the foundational principle of Western civilization has gained renewed appeal.

Marine Le Pen openly identifies as Christian, and Meloni strongly emphasizes her Catholic faith. In central and eastern Europe, right-wing populist leaders in Hungary and Poland explicitly highlight the importance of Christianity. Even when right-wing populist leaders themselves are not Christian, they invoke "Judeo-Christian tradition" to argue that it is under threat from Muslim immigrants. These leaders assert the need to "protect the West" and "protect the nation" socially, culturally, and religiously from Islam, drawing heavily on Christian identity.

Thus, in the populist age, nationalism intersects with religious identity, revealing new trajectories.

2.5 The rise of 'outsider politics'

When considering the expansion of populist politics, particular attention must be paid to the strengthening of "outsider" characteristics among emerging parties and politicians. Argentina's President Milei is well known as a "political outsider," and some argue that most Latin American presidents today can be classified as outsiders.

Broadly speaking, outsiders are political actors who emerge from the periphery of the political order and criticize established parties and politicians from an "external" standpoint, calling for the "transformation" of existing politics.

Two major factors explain why outsiders have moved to the forefront.

The first reason is the decline of social structures that once supported established parties—particularly intermediary organizations. As discussed earlier, religious organizations have weakened, and their affiliated parties have shrunk. Similar trends can be observed in labor unions, employers' organizations, farmers' associations, and other groups. In the twentieth century, when stable relationships between such organizations and established parties formed the backbone of political systems, outsiders had limited opportunities to gain political visibility. The "presence or absence of organizational backing" largely determined electoral outcomes; thus, aspiring politicians often had to suppress their outsider identity to gain organizational support.

However, in the twenty-first century, as organizations have contracted across the board, organizational backing no longer guarantees electoral success. Instead, politicians must foreground salient issues and appeal directly to unaffiliated voters—a trend particularly pronounced among newcomers. To mobilize voters who reject established parties and vested interests, it is effective to craft a heroic outsider image that confronts entrenched elites and calls for their destruction.

The second reason is the transformation of the media system. In the twentieth century, newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and established parties collectively formed a relatively stable system. Although conflicts existed, both sides generally agreed to maintain mutual cooperation. In the twenty-first century, however, the rise and rapid expansion of outsider media—including internet broadcasting channels, individually

produced videos, social media, blogs, and more—have weakened the influence of traditional media. Outsider politicians challenging existing politics have successfully leveraged these new media platforms to reach voters more easily and, in some cases, to dramatically increase their visibility. Even without party organizations or affiliated groups, it has become possible to mobilize unaffiliated voters through online appeals.

The rise of outsider media and outsider politicians thus threatens the status of mainstream media and mainstream parties. Moreover, this shift from mainstream to outsider media parallels—and reinforces—the transformation from “religious organizational politics” to “identity-based religious politics.” Outsider media frequently employ impactful images, videos, and direct messaging—tools highly suited to transmitting religious messages. Whereas religious organizations traditionally maintain group cohesion through internal newsletters and institutional publications, secularization and organizational decline have diminished these channels. In contrast, the modes of communication used by outsider media—particularly when intertwined with anti-Islamic narratives, the exclusion of perceived “outsiders,” or ideological battles against “the left”—possess strong mobilizing power. Amid the large-scale transformation of the media environment, religion, equipped with new media technologies, may be acquiring renewed vitality as a form of “religious identity” that extends beyond traditional organizational boundaries.

3. Outsiders’ takeover of major parties: Left- and right-wing populism

American populism has a distinctly outsider character. President Trump emerged not from professional politics but from real estate and entertainment, representing a fundamental deviation from conventional political elites—a classic case of outsider populism penetrating an established party. The extraordinary influence of Charlie Kirk, a 31-year-old activist who became a central voice of American conservatism and the Christian right before his assassination in 2025, would also have been inconceivable without the digital ecosystem of podcasts and social media that enables non-elite actors to mobilize mass support.

Yet unlike Europe—where populist figures typically form new parties—Trumpism did not emerge outside the party system. The MAGA movement (Make America Great Again) began as outsider populism attacking the Republican Party from the outside but eventually captured its organizational core from within. Grassroots anger (anti-immigration, anti-globalization, anti-elite), the mobilizing capacity of evangelical networks, and a new media sphere centered on Fox, X, and podcasts converged to create a self-defined “anti-establishment faction within the Republican Party,” pushing aside traditional party elites.

In this respect, Trumpism represents an insider-outsider hybrid rather than a purely external challenger.

In response, currents of socialism and social democracy—previously marginal in American politics—gained traction within the Democratic Party. Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez advocate democratic socialism and condemn oligarchic politics under Trump; they are frequently described as left-wing populists. Zoran Manidani, an Indian American Muslim elected mayor of New York, likewise identifies as a democratic socialist and represents another outsider current.

As the moderate Democratic mainstream remains internally fragmented, these outsider figures have become central to the anti-Trump coalition, creating a polarized two-front populist landscape.

3.1 Welfare chauvinism and authoritarian political philosophy

Even if it does not constitute a fully coherent public philosophy, the Trump administration displays a distinctive political logic. From the standpoint of political theory, “deal-making politics” under America First is a form of national egoistic utilitarianism—maximizing the welfare of U.S. citizens regardless of costs imposed on other states.

A clear manifestation is found in Trump’s tariff policies. High tariffs were imposed not only on rivals such as China but also on allies including Europe and Japan, generating significant international friction. Trump even floated distributing several thousand dollars per person from tariff revenue in 2026—an economic-nationalist redistribution scheme grounded in welfare chauvinism.

At the same time, the administration reflects a strong libertarian orientation: prioritizing market mechanisms, reducing redistribution to vulnerable groups, and striving toward a minimal state. This tendency, already evident in the first Trump administration, became more pronounced in the second. Among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, a sharpened variant—techno-libertarianism—emerged, often supportive of Trump [15, 16].

Peter Thiel has explicitly argued that “freedom and democracy are no longer compatible” [17] and has criticized democratic governance as structurally inefficient, later promoting alternative “zones of freedom” such as cyberspace, outer space, and sea steading [18]. Elon Musk—once Thiel’s collaborator—purchased X (Twitter) in the name of absolute free expression and launched a private space-development enterprise. The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), with its mass dismissal of federal employees and drastic cuts to agencies handling health, education, and science, reflects this techno-libertarian critique of the administrative state.

An even more radical development is neo-reactionism (Curtis Yarvin, known online as *Moldbug*), which rejects democratic politics, egalitarianism, and liberalism. Yarvin’s writings [19, 20] propose governing the state as a joint-stock corporation under a single sovereign shareholder (“neo-cameralism”). This pushes libertarian logic to the extreme, replacing rights-based governance with technocratic authority.

In the United Kingdom, the Dark Enlightenment (Nick Land) rejects Enlightenment ideals of reason and equality, articulating an explicitly anti-democratic worldview [21].

These movements differ from classical conservatism or neoconservatism. They justify CEO-style governance, argue that democracy is structurally inefficient, and constitute openly authoritarian ideological currents.

3.2 “Aristopopulism” as syncretic authoritarianism: A post-liberal theory of regime transformation

One of the intellectual currents influencing the Trump administration is post-liberalism, whose leading theorist is Patrick J. Deneen. In *Why Liberalism Failed* [22], Deneen argues that liberalism—grounded in freedom and individualism—has produced homogenization, inequality, and the erosion of social bonds (family, community, religion, nation). Both classical liberalism (Locke) and progressive liberalism (Dewey), he contends, severed individuals from nature, place, and tradition, creating a self-reinforcing liberal elite (“liberacracy”).

Liberalism thus “succeeded” in expanding individual autonomy but thereby created the conditions of its own failure. Deneen predicts that this failure will likely yield

either a liberacratic dictatorship or an authoritarian regime. His alternative emphasizes community-based customs, local economies, and civic participation.

Deneen—an adviser to Vice President Vance—advances not simply a critique of progressive liberalism but a rejection of the entire liberal tradition. Empirically, post-liberalism functions as anti-liberalism.

In *Regime Change* [23], he presents a blueprint for a post-liberal political order and introduces a key concept: aristopopulism. The *aristoi* (“the excellent”) represent a renewed aristocracy empowered by vigorous populism; aristopopulism fuses popular legitimacy with aristocratic governance.

Deneen frames this as a modern mixed constitution—an alliance of “the many” and “the few.” However, substantively, it justifies a hierarchical order in which democratic institutions remain formally intact while decision-making and value formation are concentrated in a small elite.

This design mirrors syncretic authoritarianism: an ideological fusion of populist rhetoric, hierarchical governance, and moralized authority.

Because the regime retains elections and legislatures while concentrating executive authority and moral power in the hands of a few, aristopopulism corresponds closely to hybrid authoritarianism—systems that maintain democratic procedures but hollow out their substantive content.

Thus, aristopopulism provides a normative blueprint for elite-led, post-liberal authoritarianism.

3.3 The religious dimension underpinning populism: White Christian nationalism

Post-liberalism’s Catholic influence is significant. In *Regime Change*, Deneen characterizes the “institutions of separation”—including separation of powers and church–state separation—as “problems of dissolution,” and advocates “institutions of integration,” positioning the nation as the locus for integrating religion into political authority. This implies a potential overturning of church-state separation.

In practice, the Trump administration exhibited strong features of White Christian Nationalism (WCN), an ideology that blends ethnoracial identity, Christian myth, hierarchical order, and authoritarian governance [7]. The creation of a “Faith Office” within the administration exemplifies how religion became embedded not only in mobilization but in governance.

A vast evangelical network links local congregations, national ministries, media platforms, and donor organizations. These networks merge with the Republican Party’s internal power structures, generating both grassroots populism and elite-driven authoritarian tendencies.

Evangelicals have consolidated a political identity grounded in:

- America as a nation chosen by God
- Defense of the traditional family; opposition to abortion and LGBT rights
- Opposition to multiculturalism
- Infusing education and law with Christian values
- Restoring a “lost America” rooted in ethno-cultural unity

Compared with Europe—where religion functions essentially as cultural identity—U.S. evangelicalism operates as an organized political institution, shaping candidate selection, judicial appointments, education policy, and reproductive-rights legislation.

This produces a form of syncretic authoritarianism in which religious, cultural, and political authority are blended. Whereas Europe's religious politics are symbolic and identity-based, in the United States, they are structural and governing.

3.4 Hybrid new authoritarianism

The ideas supporting the second Trump administration can be summarized in three components:

1. Anti-individualist moral authoritarianism rejecting liberal-democratic values
2. Anti-democratic executive aggrandizement treating democratic procedures as inefficient
3. Religious authoritarianism imposing moral order through state institutions

Taken together, these currents form a composite structure of anti-liberal-democratic authoritarianism + religious authoritarianism.

In practice, the administration pursued:

- Consolidation of executive power (Schedule Policy/Career (Formerly “Schedule F”))
- Intervention in the DOJ, FBI, and federal agencies
- Pressure on media and educational institutions
- Expansion of immigrant exclusion and anti-multicultural policies
- Incorporation of evangelical demands into state policymaking

Yet the Constitution formally remains in place. This is authoritarianization from within democracy—transforming democratic institutions through executive centralization, bureaucratic capture, and religiously coded interventions rather than abolishing them outright.

The resulting configuration resembles global cases of competitive authoritarianism: elections and legislatures remain, but civic freedoms erode, and executive power expands.

Thus, contemporary American populism constitutes a hybrid new authoritarianism: a regime type defined by “democratic institutions + substantive authoritarian governance.”

If entrenched, this form would crystallize into a hybrid authoritarian regime and become an “enemy” of liberal democracy.

This section positions Deneen's post-liberal theory within the broader genealogy of authoritarian populism and prepares the ground for Section 5's comparative analysis of Christian nationalism in the United States and Japan.

Ideological current	Core orientation	Model of political authority	Relation to democracy	Regime tendency
(Ordinary) libertarianism	Market freedom, minimum state	Constitutional–pluralist governance	Electoral democracy	Majoritarian Democracy (market-liberal)
National utilitarianism	National interest	Government-centered calculation	Electoral democracy	Majoritarian democracy with instrumental logic
Techno-libertarianism	Enterprise-like Efficiency	CEO-style technocratic governance	anti-democratic	Non-democratic authoritarianism
Dark enlightenment (neo-reactionism)	Anti-egalitarianism, rejection of popular sovereignty	CEO-monarchical authority	Explicitly anti-liberal and democratic	Non-democratic authoritarianism
Post-liberalism (Common good conservatism)	Common good, moral order, elite guidance	Aristopopulism (elite–people fusion)	Mixed constitutionalism	Hybrid authoritarianism
White Christian Nationalism	Personalist leader veneration, sacralized national identity	Charismatic-quasi-religious authority	Electoral democracy, but obscure church-state separation	Hybrid populism with authoritarian drift

Table 1.
Ideological currents and regime tendencies in contemporary American populism.

To clarify the ideological diversity within American populism and its differentiated implications for political governance, **Table 1** maps major ideological currents onto their corresponding models of regime tendencies.

While many voters remain anchored in ordinary libertarian or utilitarian democratic preferences, ideologically articulated currents such as post-liberalism and techno-libertarianism exert disproportionate influence on elite discourse and institutional trajectories.

This ideological-institutional linkage helps explain why the American case exhibits a more direct pathway from populist mobilization to hybrid authoritarian tendencies than is observed in Europe.

4. Japan: “Insider/outsider” populism and nationalistic Shinto

4.1 Polarization into left- and right-wing populism

In Japan in 2025, the Sanseitō, which foregrounded criticism of foreigners in its campaign for the House of Councilors election, made significant gains and generated a powerful shock as the first full-scale advance of a right-wing populist party in postwar Japanese national politics. The emergence of a powerful party situated “to the right of the LDP” that secured a substantial number of seats was itself an unprecedented development in the postwar era. The Sanseitō’s nationalist “Japanese First” platform strongly evokes the recent right-wing populist parties in various European countries that advocate “our country first” [3].

Since the founding of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1955 through the mid-2020s, Japan has been characterized by a one-party-dominant system under the LDP and was often treated as an “exception” among advanced democracies [24]. However, recent changes in Japanese politics share many features with developments in Europe, particularly the rise of right-wing populist parties and the decline of established parties. The coalition government centered on the LDP, which had once appeared rock-solid, lost its majority both in the 2024 general election and the 2025 Upper House election, resulting in the formation of a minority government—an unusually weak governing coalition by Japanese standards. The era of LDP one-party dominance appears to have come to an end.

In October 2025, Sanae Takaichi was elected president of the LDP. Contrary to most media expectations, a figure known as a right-winger within the party was chosen. This outcome partly reflected the party’s sense of crisis over the loss of conservative voters to the Sanseitō in the Upper House election. Moreover, when the centrist Kōmeitō, the LDP’s long-time coalition partner, withdrew from the coalition in the same month, President Takaichi decided to form a coalition with the center-right Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party). This enabled her to become Japan’s first female prime minister, but the new LDP-Ishin coalition has advanced conservative policies on national security and immigration that extend beyond those of previous governments. Japanese politics has thus entered an unprecedented phase of fluidity, making comparisons with developments in Europe particularly meaningful.

Japan has long been regarded as a country where populism has been unusually weak or confined to local politics [4]. Yet, as mentioned above, in addition to the Sanseitō, parties that criticize established parties and advance populist claims—such as the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and Reiwa Shinsengumi—expanded their support in the July 2025 Upper House election. It appears that the wave of populism has now reached Japan in earnest. Reiwa Shinsengumi corresponds to a left-wing populist party in the Japanese context, but its stance toward nationalism is clearly distinct from that of conventional left-wing parties. From the party’s very name, combining Reiwa (the current era name) and Shinsengumi (a samurai-era corps), to leader Taro Yamamoto’s past attempt at a direct appeal to the Emperor, there is a clear resonance of “nationalism from the left.”

4.2 Right-wing populism, welfare chauvinism, and nationalistic Shinto

Among right-wing populist forces, the Sanseitō appears to have studied the “success stories” of European welfare chauvinism and straightforwardly applied this “winning formula.” The party not only called for restrictions on the acceptance of foreigners but also proposed child-rearing benefits targeted exclusively at “families with Japanese nationality” and advocated tax cuts and reductions in social insurance premiums. This combination of limiting foreigners and prioritizing the welfare of “one’s own nationals” fits the definition of welfare chauvinism precisely. The slogan “Japanese First,” echoing “America First,” further underscores the value of comparing the Sanseitō’s policies and claims with those in Europe and the United States.

Regarding religion, postwar Japan has shared important similarities with Europe. The LDP’s support base included influential religious organizations such as the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, Rissho Kōsei-kai, Seicho-no-Ie, and Reiyūkai, all of which played powerful electoral roles. The Unification Church also formed part of this network. Kōmeitō’s support base is Soka Gakkai, whose members engaged in intensive electoral mobilization. Behind the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition stood multiple

religious organizations; in this sense, religious groups were in fact among the hidden protagonists of postwar politics [24].

Recently, however, many of the religious organizations that supported the LDP have shown declining mobilizing power. Some, such as Rissho Kōsei-kai and Seichō-no-Ie, have withdrawn their support for the LDP. The Unification Church became the target of fierce criticism after its deep ties with the LDP were exposed. These developments weakened the LDP's vote-gathering capacity and accelerated its decline. Soka Gakkai, which supports Kōmeitō, is also experiencing an aging membership, and its capacity to sustain intensive electoral mobilization has been questioned. The steep decline in Kōmeitō's proportional-representation vote totals clearly demonstrates the weakening of religious mobilization.

As in Europe, established parties that rely on religious organizations have struggled, while the Sanseitō—whose appeals rest on “religious identity”—has broadened its support. Although a powerful religious organization does not back the party, it consistently invokes the “Land of Rice Ears” and the “Eight Million Gods,” foregrounding a Shinto-based cultural identity; in August 2025, its legislators made a collective visit to Yasukuni Shrine. It appears to appeal to Shinto-based Japanese cultural “unity” as an anchor of identity against the perceived “threat” of foreigners and as a marker of group belonging, separating Japanese from non-Japanese.

The relationship with Shinto-based organizations became a significant issue under the Abe administration. The Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership and the right-wing group Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) wielded substantial influence over the government, and most cabinet ministers were affiliated with these organizations. These groups inherit the legacy of prewar state Shinto nationalism and advocate right-wing constitutional revision. Prime Minister Abe himself held right-wing views, advocated a “departure from the postwar regime,” sought to revise the pacifist postwar constitution, revised the Basic Act on Education, and pushed through security legislation enabling the exercise of collective self-defense. The LDP's 2012 draft constitution included provisions recognizing the Emperor as head of state, revisions to weaken fundamental human rights clauses, and explicit provisions regarding the Self-Defense Forces.

Sanae Takaichi, who became prime minister in 2025, has clearly inherited Abe's politics. She is strongly committed to visiting Yasukuni Shrine and emphasizes a Shinto-based identity in her political stance, which forms part of the basis for her strong support among conservative voters. In this way, the right wing within the LDP stands in the lineage of nationalistic Shinto, and extreme right-wing parties such as the Sanseitō and the Conservative Party also embody strongly Shinto-inflected thinking.

4.3 Populism “from above” (insider) and “from below” (outsider)

Japan has now entered a new phase in which populist parties are no longer confined to local politics. The defining feature of the 2025 elections was not merely a change of government or a routine anti-incumbent cycle but the emergence of multiple outsider populist parties that secured significant vote shares nationwide. Several nationally organized populist parties emerged as actors capable of aggregating dissatisfaction, anxiety, anger, hatred, and political distrust at the national level. This outcome marks a qualitative turning point in which Japan has joined the historical trend that has destabilized long-established Western democracies since the late 2010s.

Japan has long been regarded as a “deviant case” in comparative politics. Under the LDP's one-party dominance, electoral support relied on a distinctive form of political linkage—clientelism—rather than clear ideological or programmatic appeals. Support

was sustained through personal support organizations (*kōenkai*), brokerage of particularistic benefits, and dense social embeddedness. Based on this structure, scholars interpreted Japan as possessing institutional and cultural buffers that prevented the eruption of large-scale national populism. Thus, while populist parties in Europe and the United States rose as national-level challengers, Japanese populism was thought to be confined to subnational politics and understood primarily as a localized style of protest.

Yet this conventional view is incomplete. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi mobilized mass support under the slogan “Destroy the LDP” and maintained long-term power through neoliberal postal-privatization reforms. Although a Democratic Party government briefly took office, the LDP–Kōmeitō coalition soon returned to power, and the Abe administration pursued nationalist policies, advanced authoritarianization, and maintained long-term rule. In political science, these are regarded as forms of populism: Koizumi’s politics correspond to libertarian populism, while Abe’s represent nationalistic/authoritarian populism.

In recent years, however, corruption scandals associated with the Abe faction contributed to ruling-party defeats and the loss of the majority from 2024 onward. The 2025 Upper House election thus became a structural breaking point in Japanese politics.

Populist currents first emerged at the local level. In Osaka/Kansai, Nippon Ishin no Kai seized local power and built a hegemonic regime. In Nagoya, Genzei Nippon (Tax Reduction Japan) gained support under Mayor Takashi Kawamura; in Tokyo, Tomin First no Kai Tokyoites First Party emerged under Governor Yuriko Koike. In the 2024 Tokyo gubernatorial election, candidate Shinji Ishimaru performed strongly, while in Hyogo the victory of former Governor Motohiko Saito also reflected outsider appeal. These movements exemplify what Mizushima conceptualizes as “outsider politics” [4].

Although Nippon Ishin no Kai has attempted to become a nationwide party, its success has been uneven. By contrast, in the 2025 Upper House election, far-right exclusionist parties such as the Sanseitō and the Conservative Party made significant gains. Together with the National Conservative Party, outsider populist parties became national-level actors. Their rise cannot be understood without the role of outsider media—SNS, YouTube, and online influencers.

After the election, the Takaichi administration was formed in cooperation with Nippon Ishin no Kai. Thus, the former dominant party, the LDP, joined with a populist outsider party to create a right-wing governing coalition.

This configuration recalls prewar Japan. Unlike Germany and Italy, where fascism arose from outsider movements, prewar Japanese fascism combined outsider pressure with elite decision-making. Civilian right-wing activists attacked political elites, while under this pressure, Fumimaro Konoe formed a military-bureaucratic fascist regime. Masao Maruyama therefore described Japanese fascism as “fascism from above,” in contrast to European “fascism from below” [13].

The schema remains suggestive today. The leader of the NHK Party, an extremely populist party, was arrested in 2025 for defamation, resembling Maruyama’s notion of a “lawless man.” Nippon Ishin no Kai and the Sanseitō constitute “populism from below,” while the Koizumi, Abe, and Takaichi administrations represent “populism from above.” The coalition between the LDP and Nippon Ishin no Kai thus signifies a convergence of populism from above and populism from below—a pattern of vertical hybridization.

Furthermore, the LDP briefly formed a joint Diet caucus with the NHK Party, indicating a qualitative transformation in the ruling bloc.

Taken together, these developments can be organized into the following four types of Japanese populism (Table 2).

Type	Period/Representative cases	Structural position	Emotional basis	Conceptual type
Libertarian Reform Populism	Koizumi era	Insider (within the LDP-centered regime)	Optimistic modernization	Populism from above
Authoritarian Nationalistic Populism	Abe era/Takaichi administration	Insider (within the LDP-centered regime)	Symbolic identity consolidation + order politics	Populism from above
Regional Outsider Populism	Nippon Ishin no Kai (Osaka), Tomin First (Tokyo), Genzei Nippon (Nagoya), etc.	Outsider (anti-LDP)	Region-based identity centered on major metropolitan areas	Populism from below
Nationwide Outsider Populism	Nationwide rise since 2024 (Sanseitō, Conservative Party, Democratic Party for the People, etc.)	Outsider (non-establishment)	Resentment, anger, anxiety	Populism from below

Source: Made by the author.

Table 2.
Four types of populism in contemporary Japan.

This fourfold classification shows that Japan has historically harbored two distinct forms of elite-led populism within the regime and that in recent years outsider populism first emerged at the regional level and, since 2024, as a national electoral force. Regional outsider populism is grounded in regional identity and often takes the form of ideological libertarianism (Nippon Ishin no Kai, Genzei Nippon) or region-first doctrines like “First” (Tomin First). Nationwide outsider populism, by contrast, tends toward far-right exclusionism similar to European populism, although the Democratic Party for the People occupies an intermediate position between the established centrist-left Constitutional Democratic Party and the cluster of outsider populist parties.

The distinction between insider (within the regime) and outsider (outside the regime) populism is analytically crucial for the segmentation analysis based on well-being (WB) developed in the Chapter “Japan’s 2025 Populist Turn from Outside”. The emotional foundation of outsider populism—resentment generated by WB depletion—rests on motivational mechanisms entirely different from those underlying libertarian populism, grounded in high WB, and authoritarian populism, grounded in symbolic identity integration. The year 2025 was the first historical moment in which all these forms of populism were simultaneously visible nationwide.

5. Are we still living in the century of fascism?

One of the authors (Masaya Kobayashi) previously wrote the 2016 article “Are We Still Living in the Century of Fascism? — Political Cycles and New Authoritarianism in Japan [25].” For this chapter, ‘neo-fascism’ refers to hybrid political configurations that maintain electoral and parliamentary institutions while eroding their substantive democratic content through authoritarian rule resembling interwar fascism.

In comparative politics, concepts such as neo-corporatism, neo-clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, and, in political theory, neo-liberalism frequently appear. The proliferation of such “neo-” concepts suggests that contemporary politics is witnessing the re-emergence—under transformed conditions—of premodern political forms and interwar authoritarian tendencies [14, 26]. Across the world, democratic backsliding has advanced in the form of “competitive authoritarianism” and “new authoritarianism (neo-authoritarianism)” [10, 11, 26].

Inspired by Philippe C. Schmitter’s classic question, “Still the Century of Corporatism?” [27], the 2016 article posed its own question to examine whether fascist tendencies might reappear in altered form in the twenty-first century. Given the global rise of far-right populism and authoritarian democracy—including in Japan—this earlier work warned that fascism might not return in its classical form, but rather as hybrid neo-fascism: regimes that maintain electoral and parliamentary institutions while progressively hollowing out their substantive democratic functions [13].

5.1 Three patterns in Europe, the United States, and Japan, and neo-fascism/authoritarianism

Nearly 10 years after that earlier article was written, the global context has changed dramatically. Far-right populism now dominates political discourse across Europe and the United States. Populist parties have taken government in Italy, and in France and the United Kingdom—long regarded as cradles of liberal democracy—far-right forces have approached governmental power [3]. Germany, which had long resisted such tendencies due to its Nazi past, has since 2023 witnessed the rapid rise of the right-wing populist AfD, now the nation’s second-largest party [28].

Earlier in this chapter, European populism was analyzed as a form of outsider politics and compared with developments in the United States and Japan, identifying three distinct patterns:

- Europe: bottom-up outsider populism → institutional penetration
- United States: bottom-up outsider mobilization → top-level takeover and insider transformation
- Japan: top-down insider populism × bottom-up outsider populism → vertical hybridization

Italian and German fascism—what Masao Maruyama called “fascism from below”—represented “authentic” forms of fascism in which mass movements overturned existing institutions [13]. While contemporary Europe has not (yet) seen full-scale fascist governments, far-right populism clearly threatens democratic erosion, and the AfD’s ascent illustrates how outsider movements can approach national power.

In the United States, the Trump movement—powered by MAGA—penetrated and ultimately seized control of the Republican Party, marginalizing its traditional mainstream. Outsider populism thus transformed internally into insider populism, placing the United States between the European and Japanese models of democratic backsliding.

The second Trump administration profoundly altered “the land of liberty.” It circumvented legal constraints, expanded presidential decree powers, used ICE to

detain and deport undocumented immigrants, suppressed political opponents, and mobilized security forces to intimidate Democratic governors. Some commentators and critics described these developments as a form of “Nazification.” Scholars of fascism fled abroad, and protests emerged against oligarchic and quasi-monarchical tendencies. Freedom of expression was curtailed through state pressure.

Although Congress and the courts continued to function—and occasionally to block administration initiatives—this uneasy coexistence of democratic institutions with authoritarian governance constituted a hybrid neo-fascist configuration. Tariff-induced inflation and the Epstein scandal eroded Trump’s approval ratings (as of November 2025), but given the contested transfer of power at the end of his first administration, many observers questioned whether a fair election would be held. California Governor Gavin Newsom even warned that Trump might attempt to block the election altogether, which would signal a serious risk of democratic breakdown in the United States.

In this respect, Hungary represents a European boundary case: a populist movement that originated as an outsider challenge has evolved into an insider-led regime, illustrating how prolonged populist governance can, under weakened institutional and supranational constraints, approach hybrid authoritarianism even within the EU framework.

Japan likewise experienced a form of top-down insider populism under Abe. Supported by nationalist currents within the ruling party, the Abe administration promoted constitutional revision and a movement toward a prewar-style authoritarian order. Although Abe’s government ended during COVID-19 and his assassination in 2022 by a victim of the Unification Church exposed deep LDP–Unification Church ties, the resulting scandals weakened the LDP and enabled a temporary democratic recovery (2024). Yet the 2025 Upper House election produced a new wave of populism and the formation of the Takaichi administration, reviving concerns about authoritarian drift.

Sanae Takaichi had previously suggested, as Minister of Internal Affairs, the possibility of suspending broadcasters that violated “political fairness”—a stance echoing Trump’s attacks on the free press. With the 2025 alignment between the LDP and Osaka Ishin, Japan now presents a hybrid model in which top-down insider populism and bottom-up outsider populism coexist and potentially reinforce one another. Japan thus displays a fusion of top-down and bottom-up populism—resembling prewar “fascism from above” and incorporating “fascism from below” [13].

While the dominant pattern in Japan is insider-led governance supported by nationalist discourse within the ruling party, it should be noted that outsider parties display heterogeneous profiles: parties such as Sanseito and the Conservative Party articulate strong nationalist appeals outside governing coalitions, whereas Nippon Ishin no Kai represents a libertarian populist configuration with limited nationalist emphasis, and the Democratic Party for the People exhibits a more moderate form of nationalism.

The most critical risk is that much as prewar Japan’s “fascism from above” absorbed bottom-up extremist pressure, contemporary insider populism may integrate outsider extremism and evolve into hybrid neo-fascism: democratic institutions persist, but authoritarian content expands. Although today’s Japan is not (yet) undergoing full-fledged authoritarian consolidation—parliament and opposition parties’ function, and elections continue—the historical analogy is significant. Prewar Japanese fascism can be interpreted through the lens of populism, and contemporary far-right populism may similarly be understood as a neo-populist phenomenon.

If vertically fused, these currents may evolve into a hybrid neo-fascism reminiscent of the prewar era. As the U.S. example shows, contemporary far-right populism

can advance authoritarianism without formally abolishing democratic institutions. Elections continue, but fairness erodes; administrative authority becomes concentrated; and media and political opponents face repression. Neo-fascism may therefore coexist with parliamentary institutions, and the survival of formal democracy does not guarantee democratic substance.

Yet “neo-” political forms do not mechanically reproduce the past. European populism may not destroy democracy, and American democracy may recover after the second Trump administration. Thus, the evolving relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and fascism demands continual and careful monitoring.

The term *hybrid fascism*, as employed in this chapter, does not denote a revival or repetition of historical fascist regimes. Nor does it imply ideological continuity with classical fascism as it emerged in interwar Europe. Rather, *hybrid fascism* is introduced as an analytical concept to capture contemporary political configurations in which selected ideological, organizational, and affective elements historically associated with fascism reappear in hybridized form within formally democratic systems.

Specifically, hybrid fascism refers to configurations in which populist mobilization, grounded in moralized people-elite antagonism and cultural or religious identity, is combined with insider-led strategies of governance that centralize authority, weaken pluralism, and erode democratic accountability, without abolishing electoral competition or constitutional frameworks. In contrast to classical fascism, these configurations do not rely on totalitarian party organization, mass paramilitarism, or explicit suspension of democratic institutions. Instead, they operate by gradually hollowing out substantive democratic norms while preserving their procedural shell.

This conceptualization is built on comparative research on populism, democratic backsliding, and hybrid authoritarianism, while extending these literatures by foregrounding the interaction between outsider mobilization and insider power. The concept of hybrid fascism thus serves as a heuristic: it highlights a distinctive pathway through which contemporary populism becomes compatible with durable institutional control, while maintaining analytical distinctions from historical fascism, competitive authoritarianism, and illiberal democracy. In this sense, hybrid fascism should be understood not as a distinct regime type, but as a historically informed subset within the broader category of hybrid authoritarianism.

To clarify the asymmetric configurations identified across regions, **Table 3** summarizes the key dimensions of hybrid populism and authoritarian risk in Europe, the United States, and Japan. This comparative overview highlights how similar structural patterns of outsider-insider relation produces divergent political consequences depending on institutional constraints and political-cultural contexts.

5.2 Religion, values, and the possibility of non-populist ethical politics

This chapter highlights three religious pathways:

- Europe: Christian identity as civilizational boundary (outsider populism)
- United States: organized evangelical mobilization + Catholic post-liberalism (outsider → insider populism)
- Japan: Shinto-inflected nationalism and quasi-religious outsider parties (vertical hybrid populism)

Dimension	Europe	United States	Japan
Primary populist locus	Outsider parties	Outsider mobilization fused with insider capture	Insider-led governance supported by outsider mobilization
Direction of populism	From below	From below → from above	From above with resonance from below
Mode of political influence	Agenda pressure on mainstream parties	Party capture and institutional penetration	Symbolic-nationalist legitimization within ruling elites
Role of religion / symbolism	Civilizational-cultural identity (limited institutionalization)	Institutionalized evangelical networks	Cultural-symbolic Shinto nationalism
Degree of political penetration	Indirect	High	Moderate (political discourse level)
Democratic implications (descriptive)	Fragmented pressure on liberal democracy	Concentrated stress on democratic institutions	Latent but rising structural tension

Table 3.
Typologies of populist mobilization across Europe, the United States, and Japan.

In European populism, we identified a religious dimension grounded in Christian identity, particularly in contexts of conflict surrounding Muslim immigration—an instance of bottom-up outsider populism [9]. In the United States, we observed the influence of Catholic post-liberalism and evangelical Christian nationalism on Trumpism, where bottom-up religious mobilization penetrated the Republican Party and reshaped it from within [7]. In Japan, nationalistic Shinto-inflected identity politics supported LDP insider populism, and more recently, new outsider populist parties with religious or quasi-religious elements have created a vertically hybrid populist configuration.

Historically, Japanese fascism was legitimized through State Shinto, rooted in the emperor system; the fusion of nationalism and religion provided ideological justification for authoritarian tendencies and a fascist drift [13]. Trump-era White Christian nationalism similarly sacralizes politics and threatens church-state separation [7]. Accordingly, when contemporary right-wing populism fuses with religion or quasi-religion, authoritarian and exclusionary tendencies tend to be strengthened.

However, religion and values do not necessarily promote populism or authoritarianism. As shown in Chapter “Japan’s 2025 Populist Turn from Outside”, declines in well-being (WB)—not merely economic hardship—strongly predict support for populist parties. Supporters of far-right populism tend to show relatively high levels of religiosity and heightened sensitivity to sacred values, but this religiosity often operates within a context of psychosocial depletion rather than flourishing.

Crucially, WB exerted stronger effects on electoral outcomes than income or economic distress. Declines in happiness, meaning, mattering/recognition, and psychosocial security are key drivers of populism. Across Europe, the United States, and Japan, the weakening of religious groups, labor unions, community organizations, and civic associations—once buffers that protected individuals from despair—has left people more vulnerable, increasing the appeal of populist movements. These findings resonate with communitarian political theory and social capital theory, which have long warned that the erosion of community bonds, trust, and civic participation would destabilize democracy.

A key implication emerges:

Populism is not primarily a product of ideology, but of psychosocial depletion, declining well-being, loss of meaning, non-recognition, and the breakdown of trust and shared values—into which exclusionary narratives can easily enter.

Within this framework, religiosity in populist movements functions as a “channel” for individuals seeking psychological security or an escape from unhappiness—but it tends to offer only an illusory form of hope.

By contrast, supporters of established centrist opposition parties—particularly the Constitutional Democratic Party—report higher well-being, stronger senses of meaning, and greater experiences of mattering and social recognition. If these parties could more effectively address declining well-being, loss of meaning, and weakened recognition and trust, they might draw citizens away from the “illusory salvation narratives” offered by populist movements and redirect political engagement toward a non-populist, ethical form of democratic politics.

Chapter “Beyond Populism” examines these normative and practical possibilities in greater depth.

Author details

Masaya Kobayashi* and Jiro Mizushima
Graduate School of Social Sciences, Chiba University, Chiba, Japan

*Address all correspondence to: masaya_kobayashi@nifty.com

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Japan's 2025 Populist Turn from Outside: Multi-Dimensional Well-Being and Value Depletion in Integrative Political Psychology

Masaya Kobayashi, Hikari Ishido and Jiro Mizushima

Abstract

Japan's 2025 House of Councillors election provides a rare empirical window into how declines in subjective well-being (WB) and value-based resources align with contemporary populist realignment. Using national survey data linked to party support and seat-change patterns, this chapter shows that multi-dimensional WBs—spanning evaluative, affective, relational, and eudaimonic domains—together with value-related indicators (meaning, mattering, intrinsic versus material orientation, and sacralization) form a coherent psychological architecture behind Japan's "populist turn from outside." Lower WB and depleted meaning and mattering are consistently associated with stronger populist attitudes, outperforming ideology, socioeconomic grievance, and basic demographics. Three configurations are identified: (1) resentment-based populism, marked by elevated negative affect and collapsed meaning and mattering; (2) sacralized far-right populism, in which resentment is intensified by pseudo-religious purity and national-cultural sacralization; and (3) reform-oriented populism, where relatively high WB and future-oriented capability (hope, optimism, and agency) support efficacy-driven, market-focused dissatisfaction. These patterns indicate a generalizable mechanism linking WB and value erosion to democratic fragility in an advanced democracy. The chapter situates these findings within integrative positive political psychology, treating negative political phenomena as diagnostic signals of deficits in well-being and values—such as meaning and recognition—thereby clarifying targets for democratic resilience and flourishing-oriented renewal.

Keywords: right-wing populism, well-being depletion, value depletion, meaning depletion, subjective well-being, existential erosion

1. Introduction

This chapter analyzes Japan's 2025 House of Councillors (Japan's upper house) election as a theoretically clarifying case for the study of populism through multi-dimensional well-being (WB) and value-related psychological resources. Rather than

treating populism primarily as an ideological endpoint, a reaction to economic grievance, or a product of institutional distrust, the analysis examines how affective strain and existential vulnerability—especially the erosion of meaning and mattering—cohere into a psychological architecture associated with outsider-oriented populist realignment.

Early evidence from the 2016 US presidential election [1] and parallel European work [2] suggested that declines in subjective WB may be linked to populist support. Yet election-focused models that treat WB depletion and value erosion as central explanatory dimensions remain limited, and evidence from non-Western advanced democracies is especially scarce. Japan therefore offers a valuable empirical setting: While ideological polarization is present, the 2025 realignment renders the underlying affective–existential structure unusually transparent, allowing the WB-populism relationship to be examined with particular conceptual clarity.

Consistent with positive psychology conventions, the chapter centers on subjective WB indicators, while extending the analysis to multi-dimensional WB and value-orientation measures—including meaning, mattering, intrinsic versus material orientation, and identity-related sacralization. This broader set of indicators enables an integrative political-psychological account of why distinct populist formations can emerge within a party system, and why some far-right mobilization takes a pseudo-religious, sacralized form despite low levels of substantive spirituality in the population. In this way, Japan is not treated as a deviant case but as a revealing one: a context in which the psychological infrastructure beneath contemporary populism becomes empirically visible and comparably interpretable across democracies.

2. The National Emergence of Populism from below: Philosophical and measurement foundations

2.1 Historical background

As discussed in Chapter 1 “Populism Typology across Europe, the United States, and Japan: Still the Century of Hybrid Fascism?,” the 2025 electoral rupture should be understood not as the origin of Japan’s populist crisis but as its crystallization. The legitimacy architecture of post-2012 Japan had already eroded prior to 2025, as programmatic alternatives narrowed, ethical horizons receded from mainstream party discourse, and prolonged emotional depletion accumulated without institutional representation.

Thus, after the earlier phases of populism from above and local populism, populism from below finally emerged at the national level. In this context, populism emerged as an endogenous successor once the democratic meaning of elite political language could no longer be sustained. The escalation of populism did not reflect sudden ideological polarization or acute economic collapse, but rather the saturation points of long-term well-being and value depletion—when meaning, mattering, and existential security fell below a threshold that ordinary democratic competition could absorb.

The 2025 election rendered this long-term erosion electorally visible. To account for this shift, the analysis must move beyond institutional description toward psychological causal architecture. The following section, therefore, turns to the normative and theoretical foundations for treating well-being and value depletion as enabling conditions of populist realignment.

2.2 Normative foundations: Political philosophy and political science

Political science has long separated political legitimacy (normative theory) from political behavior (positive empirical analysis). This separation is historically understandable but analytically catastrophic. It obscures the fact that legitimacy is not merely a procedural attribute of institutions, but a lived psychological condition grounded in well-being and value-based experience, including meaning, recognition, and dignity.

Communitarian philosophers such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor made this structure explicit at the normative level. In parallel, communitarian sociologists and political scientists—including Amitai Etzioni and Robert Putnam—demonstrated empirically how community norms, trust, and associational life shape democratic performance, even though they did not directly operationalize well-being.

Positive political psychology, developed by one of the authors [3], provides this missing operational bridge by translating normative concepts of legitimacy into empirically measurable psychological constructs. It conceptualizes well-being and value-related resources—such as meaning, mattering, recognition, and relational functioning—as the experiential substrate through which political order is perceived, evaluated, and sustained.

2.3 Measurement framework: From philosophical intuition to psychometric operationalization

To empirically connect the philosophical arguments mentioned in the previous section to measurable political behavior, we introduce the measurement framework for our survey. This framework allows us to translate normative concepts into psychometrically defined constructs amenable to empirical testing.

2.3.1 The populism scale: Genealogy and structure

Our analysis employs a nine-item Japanese populism battery developed through the following intellectual lineage (Appendix A):

1. Akkerman et al. [4] – foundational two-dimensional conceptualization

- Anti-elitism
- People's sovereignty

2. Schulz et al. [5] – refined psychometric structure and added

- homogeneity as a distinct populist component

3. Hieda et al. (Japan) – culturally adapted and used Japanese scale [6]

- Produced the validated 9-item version by Zenkyo [7]
- Our study uses this scale directly

This genealogy matters because it shows that the structure of populism is not ad hoc but grounded in a cumulative international research tradition, enabling comparison across democracies.

2.3.2 Dimensionality in our analysis

Our dataset allows both three-factor and two-factor analyses. Psychometrically, two findings stand out:

- Anti-elitism and people's sovereignty are strongly correlated ($r = .71$), forming the core evaluative dimension of "Akkerman-type populism."
- By contrast, homogeneity exhibits only modest associations with these dimensions ($r = .39$ with people's sovereignty; $r = .25$ with anti-elitism), indicating that it constitutes a partially distinct component rather than a unified populist core.

Homogeneity was originally introduced as an indicator of the general will in populist theory. In the Japanese context, however, it also captures an anti-pluralist mode of recognition and the normatively exclusionary component of typical populist ideology.

For interpretive clarity and cross-party mapping, we adopt a two-dimensional representation:

- *X-axis*: Anti-elitism + Popular sovereignty (the combined "core populism" dimension)
- *Y-axis*: Homogeneity (anti-pluralistic recognition; basis of right-wing populism)

This 2D structure allows clear visual differentiation of party types:

- Right-/left-wing populists (e.g., Sanseitō, Reiwa Shinsengumi [Reiwa]) → high X, high Y
- Civic or center-left democrats associated with popular sovereignty (Constitutional Democratic Party [CDP]) → high X, low Y
- Non-populist governmental parties (Liberal Democratic Party [LDP], Komeito) → low X, low Y

These examples are illustrative rather than inferential; however, the empirical analysis supports this structure. Nevertheless, we do not attempt to revalidate the entire populism scale. The purpose here is typological visualization, consistent with international convention.

The following figure visualizes the two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes using the Japanese adaptation of the Akkerman–Schulz scale [6, 7]. The horizontal axis represents the combined "core populism" dimension (anti-elitism and popular sovereignty), while the vertical axis captures homogeneity.

Importantly, Hieda and Zenkyo's original validation highlighted a key divergence from Western findings: The homogeneity dimension was only weakly correlated with the other components of populism in Japan, raising questions about the assumption of a single higher-order populist attitude. On this basis, prior studies concluded that populist attitude scales do not consistently translate into electoral support or seat gains in the Japanese context.

At the same time, these earlier findings were derived primarily from local and subnational electoral settings, where populist mobilization was often embedded in region-specific issues, candidate-centered dynamics, and non-programmatic appeals. Such contexts may have constrained the observable linkage between attitudinal populism and aggregate electoral outcomes.

Building on these insights, the present analysis extends the scope from local contexts to national-level party competition. Rather than treating homogeneity as a constitutive component of a unified populist attitude, we explicitly separate core populism from homogeneity. This two-dimensional configuration provides an analytically transparent framework for distinguishing non-populist, hybrid, and right-populist parties without presupposing their aggregation into a single latent dimension (**Figure 1**).

By shifting the analytical focus to nationwide party support and seat-change patterns, this study reassesses the political relevance of populist orientations, thereby moving beyond attitudinal populism toward well-being and value-based resources as upstream psychological conditions associated with populist alignment.

It should be emphasized that this two-dimensional representation does not imply that populism in Japan cannot be meaningfully summarized along a single dimension. In fact, when the two- and three-dimensional components of populist attitudes are aggregated, the resulting composite score closely corresponds to what is conventionally understood as “typical populism,” including left-wing populist formations such as Reiwa.

The analytical value of distinguishing homogeneity as a separate dimension lies not in measuring the overall intensity of populism, but in differentiating populist parties from the established democratic opposition parties, such as the CDP, which may share elements of anti-elitism or popular sovereignty

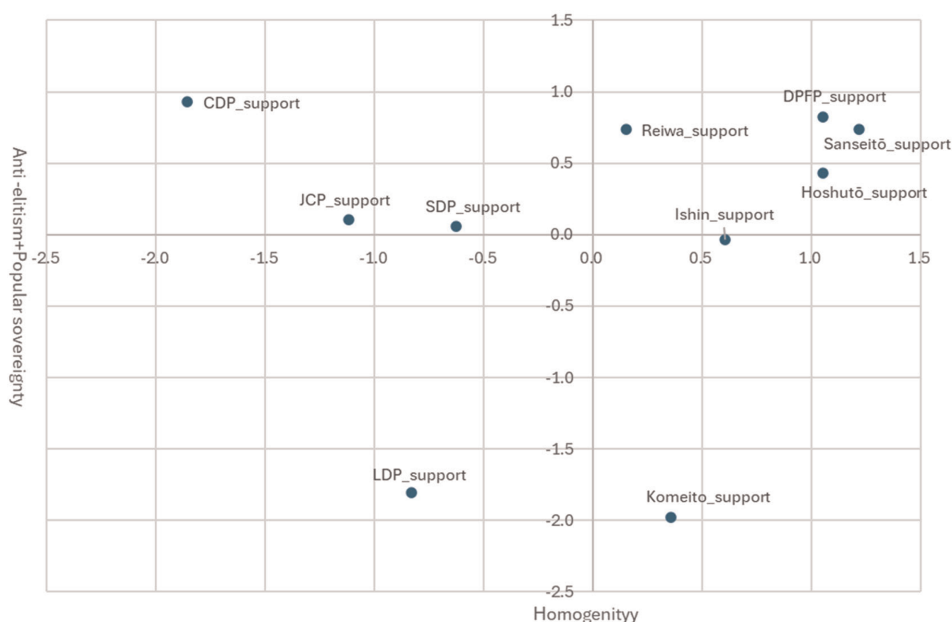


Figure 1.
 Two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes in Japan. Note. Party abbreviations are as follows: Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), Komeito, Ishin, Sanseitō, Hoshutō, Japanese Communist Party (JCP), Japan Socialist Party (JPS), and Reiwa Shinsengumi (Reiwa).

without endorsing exclusionary or homogenizing conceptions of “the people.” In this sense, the two-dimensional configuration is particularly well suited for visualizing qualitative differences among non-mainstream political actors, while the aggregated one-dimensional measure captures the general strength of populist orientation.

2.4 Why WB and populism must be integrated

Finally, this measurement foundation enables empirical analyses in Section 5–7.

Populism cannot be understood solely as ideology, and WB cannot be treated as a mere background variable. The Japanese case demonstrates:

- WB and value depletion are the enabling conditions
- Populism is the mobilizing mechanism
- Together, they form the psychological political dynamism of the 2025 realignment.

Thus:

WB and values are not private matters—they are constitutional public goods.

The normative reconstruction that follows (Concluding Chapter, “Beyond Populism”) expands this insight into a theory of democratic sustainability grounded in ethical-communitarian flourishing.

3. Psychological mechanism: WB and value depletion as the transmission belt

Well-being (WB) and values constitute the empirically observable experiential structure through which political conditions are interpreted and emotionally processed. They are not merely downstream consequences of political outcomes, but upstream determinants of how citizens evaluate politics and locate themselves within a moral horizon. When WB and value-based resources deteriorate, individuals do not simply become dissatisfied; they lose the experiential capacity to render the political world coherent, intelligible, and worth participating in. This deterioration spans hedonic, eudaimonic, and existential dimensions.

Consistent with findings in political psychology, depletion of meaning and mattering disrupts cognitive coherence and increases susceptibility to simplified, threat-oriented interpretive frames [8, 9]. Under such conditions, resentment and anger emerge as readily available affective substitutes. Resentment provides a simplified causal schema that attributes blame to elites or out-groups and moralizes political antagonism, thereby functioning as the emotional infrastructure of populist cognition.

Previous research in political psychology has shown that threat-related emotions, particularly anxiety and anger, can influence political attitudes and patterns of political participation under conditions of perceived insecurity [10, 11]. These studies demonstrate that emotions matter for political behavior, especially in moments of heightened uncertainty or electoral competition. However, such emotion-centered accounts leave open the question of why particular emotional responses become chronically salient and politically mobilizing in some social groups but not in others.

Building on her ethnographic analysis of rural support for Donald Trump, Cramer [12] provides an important conceptual advance by showing that resentment should not be understood as a transient emotional reaction. Rather, resentment operates as a socially embedded interpretive framework through which diffuse dissatisfaction is moralized and attributed to elites or out-groups, crystallizing into a durable narrative of elite—people antagonism that persists beyond the episodic affect. While Cramer's analysis is grounded in the US context, the interpretive logic of resentment she identifies is not specific to American politics and can be observed across diverse democratic settings.

This study extends and reconfigures this line of research by demonstrating that such affective and interpretive responses are themselves downstream manifestations of deeper depletion in well-being, meaning, and mattering. In this framework, emotions such as anxiety or anger do not function as primary causal drivers of populism, but rather as experiential symptoms of structural deficits in value-based resources that shape populist orientations at both the individual and collective levels.

This mechanism can be summarized directionally:

1. Depletion of WB and value-based resources (including meaning, mattering, recognition) undermines democratic trust.
2. Emotions such as resentment emerge as a compensatory affective orientation, and
3. The emotion is politicized through anti-elite mobilization, producing populist alignment and electoral behavior.

The Japanese case demonstrates this mechanism with unusual clarity. Populist escalation in the 2025 House of Councillors election did not depend primarily on programmatic repositioning or heightened ideological polarization. Instead, it reflected the availability of emotions, including resentment, as a compensatory affective response under the conditions of long-term erosion of WB and value-based resources.

The Japanese case does not represent a deviation from established Western accounts of populism; rather, it clarifies how long-term erosion of well-being and value-based resources renders democratic exhaustion politically legible through affective-existential pathways. This yields the central empirical proposition guiding the following analyses: If WB and value depletion constitute the enabling conditions of populism, then patterns of WB and values should structure party support, vote choice, and electoral outcomes. The subsequent chapters test this proposition using original national survey data, demonstrating that multi-dimensional WB and value orientations form the primary latent axis organizing political alignment and electoral transformation in Japan's contemporary populist era.

4. Data and method

4.1 Data collection

The empirical analysis uses an original nationwide online survey conducted during the final 3 days of the 2025 House of Councillors election (main fielding: 2–3 days

before election day; additional responses: election day and the day after). This narrow fieldwork window captures political preferences, emotions, multi-dimensional well-being (WB) states, and value orientations under live electoral conditions, minimizing retrospective bias.

A total of 4555 respondents participated. The sample was quota-balanced to mirror Japan's demographic composition by gender and age (Appendix B).

Respondents reported:

- demographic attributes
- policy preferences
- populist attitudes
- WB and value orientation indicators
- party support and vote intentions (district and PR ballots)

The dataset integrates three domains rarely combined in international electoral research:

1. Positive political psychology
2. Populism research
3. Dual-ballot electoral behavior

Because both ballots were measured under identical affective conditions, the survey provides a strong test of whether WB and depletion functioned as upstream causal mechanisms in Japan's 2025 populist realignment.

4.2 Core measures of well-being (WB)

WB is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing evaluative, experiential, and existential components (Appendix C).

1. *SWLS – Satisfaction With Life Scale* [13]

Measures global evaluative WB; used as the core indicator in regression models.

2. *PERMA – All dimensions* [14, 15]

Six experiential WB components:

- Positive emotion
- Negative emotion
- Engagement
- Relationships

- Meaning (PERMA-M)

- Accomplishment

These capture emotional tone and experiential WB.

3.3DM – Three-dimensional meaning [16]

Existential meaning across:

- Coherence
- Purpose
- Significance

4.Mattering—Mattering in domains of life scale [17]

Assesses perceived social recognition and visibility:

Feeling valued and adding value across the personal, interpersonal, occupational, and community domains.

4.3 Cultural, eudaimonic/relational, and future-oriented value indicators

These indicators capture culturally grounded meaning-making and a eudaimonic/relational orientation—central to understanding WB depletion in late-modern Japan (Appendix C).

1. *Ikigai* (Original items, Japanese cultural psychology)

2. Culturally embedded sense of life purpose and contribution.

3. *Inner-richness Orientation* (Original items)

Measures value orientations emphasizing psychological depth and inner wealth.

4. *HEMA-R – Eudaimonic Orientation* [18]

Captures the pursuit of eudaimonic well-being, such as authenticity, excellence, growth, and meaning/contribution.

5. *Virtue Scale* (Original scale)

A measure of moral virtues reflecting ethical self-cultivation.

6. *Hope* (Original items)

A future-directed WB indicator reflecting perceived agency and pathways toward desirable outcomes.

7. *Optimism* (Original items)

Generalized positive expectancies about the future; conceptually distinct from Hope.

Hope and optimism jointly serve as the reverse indicators of future-oriented negative well-being, allowing the depletion of this domain to be operationalized as a key component of populist susceptibility.

4.4 Transcendent and religious value indicators

1. *VIA Spirituality* [19]

A character strength capturing spiritual orientation.

2. *Materialism/Post-materialism* [20]

Assesses value-shift orientation toward material values for security and income vs. post-material orientation toward self-expression.

3. *Religiosity* [21]

General importance of religion in life.

4. *Sanctity* [22]

Sacredness/purity dimension in Moral Foundations; relevant for cultural-moral aspects of right-populist support.

4.5 Populism measurement

Populist attitudes were measured using the nine-item populism scale, adapted for Japan and based on the established international framework. As noted in Section 2.3, we follow the scale's standard three-factor logic while also using a two-dimensional representation for visualization. A standardized Populism Index (z-scored) was constructed and employed in all regression models and party-level comparisons.

4.6 Electoral preferences

Political preferences were measured through:

- party support
- district vote intention
- PR vote intention

Japan's dual-ballot system allows testing whether WB and values indicators shape both:

- political identity (support)
- behavioral choice (votes)

under identical emotional conditions.

4.7 Demographic controls

Controls included:

- age
- gender
- education
- income and assets

Regional indicators were not included.

Highly educated respondents displayed the following pattern against *Low-WB populism* (Reiwa, Sansei, Hoshu):

- High-WB libertarian populism (Ishin)
- High-WB progressive bloc (CDP, JSP)
- Moderate or Relatively High-WB governmental bloc (LDP, Koumei).

This pattern supports the interpretation that WB—not ideology alone—structures Japan's 2025 alignment.

4.8 Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages, combining correlational assessment, behavioral replication, and structural interpretation.

Stage 1—Zero-order associations

Correlation analysis between well-being (WB) and value-based indicators and party support or vote intention.

Stage 2—Behavioral replication

Testing the robustness of associations across multiple behavioral indicators, including:

- party support,
- district vote intention, and
- proportional representation (PR) vote intention,

in order to distinguish attitudinal alignment from actual voting behavior.

Stage 3—Structural interpretation.

A structural mapping and typological interpretation of the Japanese party system, identifying four broad configurations:

1. resentment-based outsider populism,
2. libertarian or high-WB populism,
3. a mainstream progressive block, and
4. a stagnating governing parties' bloc.

Across these stages, analytical scaling is applied selectively depending on purpose. Visualizations intended for typological or structural interpretation (e.g., multi-dimensional maps of populist orientations) employ standardized or rescaled scores to highlight relative positioning, whereas analyses linking attitudes to electoral outcomes retain unstandardized values to preserve substantive differences in magnitude. Consistency across multiple WB and value indicators—including SWLS, PERMA, the 3-Dimensional Meaning Scale (3DM), mattering, Ikigai, HEMA-R, inner richness, and virtue measures—supports the inference that WB and value depletion constitute a core component of the causal architecture underlying Japan’s 2025 political realignment.

4.9 Policy orientation measures (PCA-based two-dimensional ideology framework)

Policy orientations were measured using a set of multi-item issue questions covering economic redistribution, welfare provision, market regulation, sociocultural values, national security, energy policy, and ethical issues (see Appendix D for item wording). These items were designed to capture respondents’ general ideological positioning as well as their evaluative stance toward existing policy arrangements.

A principal component analysis (PCA) extracted two stable and interpretable factors (**Figure 2**). The first factor corresponds to a conventional general left-right ideological dimension, encompassing preferences over redistribution, state intervention, and sociocultural regulation. The second factor captures an orientation toward practical or contextual evaluations of government responses, reflecting whether

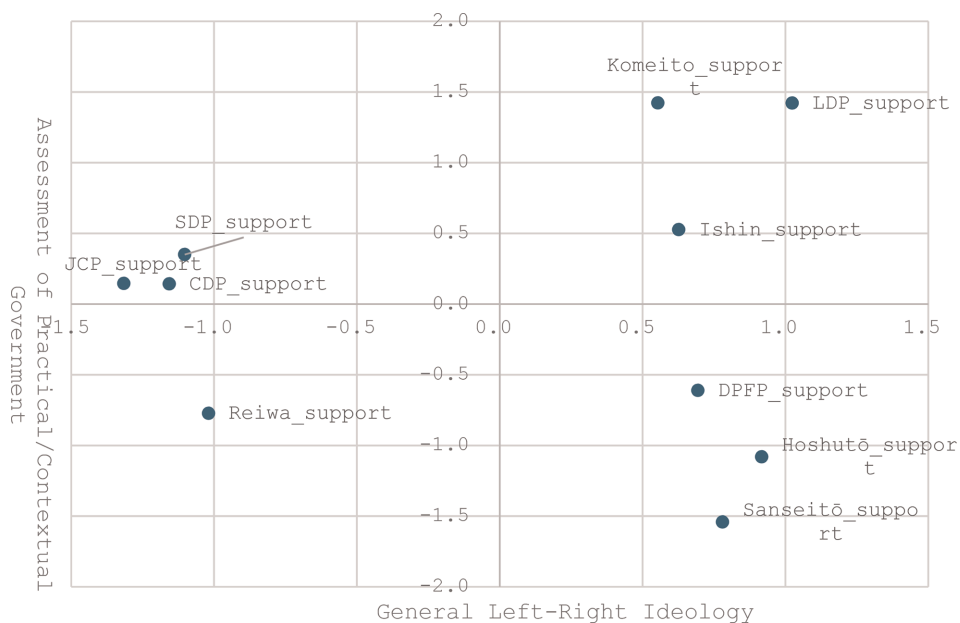


Figure 2.
Two-dimensional policy orientation of party support.

respondents prioritize maintaining existing institutional arrangements or demand more fundamental policy or political change. Importantly, this second dimension is not reducible to left-right ideology and instead reflects attitudes toward governance performance and contextual adaptability.

This two-dimensional policy framework captures the key features of contemporary Japanese political competition and is useful for situating party support patterns in ideological space. Based on party-level averages, the framework distinguishes three broad constellations:

1. a left-oriented and negatively evaluative block (JCP, CDP, JPS, Reiwa),
2. a right-oriented and positively evaluative block (LDP, Komeito), and
3. a right-oriented but negatively evaluative block (Sanseito, DPFP, Hoshutō, Ishin).

The purpose of introducing this policy-orientation framework is not to explain populist alignment directly, but to clarify the analytical distinction between policy ideology and the affective and value-based mechanisms examined in the main analyses. By explicitly modeling ideological positioning separately, the study avoids conflating populist orientations with conventional left-right policy preferences.

Figure 2 situates party support within a conventional policy-ideological space and serves as a baseline against which the well-being-based structuring of populist alignment is evaluated in subsequent sections.

Party-level positioning in a two-dimensional policy space is based on PCA of issue preferences. The horizontal axis represents general left-right ideology, and the vertical axis captures the assessment of practical or contextual government responses. This figure serves as a reference map and is analytically distinct from the populist typology examined in subsequent sections.

4.10 Robustness checks

Because party support and vote intention in both ballots and multiple WB operationalizations were collected, robust tests include the following:

- replication across support and vote intention in district/PR ballots
- consistency across evaluative/experiential/existential WB
- stability of effects controlling for demographic covariates
- analytical separation from ideological positioning (PCA-based factors)
- comparison of full vs. reduced models.

The persistence of WB/values-populism-support/vote links across all tests strengthens the conclusion that WB/values depletion is part of Japan's 2025 causal architecture.

5. Results Part I: Depletion-based foundations of populism (WB and values)

5.1 Well-being depletion and the emergence of resentment-based populism

Research on populism directly shows that resentment, status threat, and recognition-related grievances form core psychological antecedents of populist attitudes [9, 12, 23].

Complementing this, a broader body of political psychology demonstrates that perceived unfairness, threat, and negative affect—especially anger and anxiety—shape punitive or anti-elite judgments and thus provide the emotional micro-foundations through which such grievances become politically actionable [8].

Together, these two strands indicate that anger becomes politically consequential only when embedded in perceived injustice, loss of status, or threats to recognition and belonging.

This shift aligns with a broader theoretical development: Political discontent is increasingly understood to emerge from the erosion of well-being (WB) and existential orientation, rather than from changes in economic preferences alone. Recent cross-national evidence shows that declines in life satisfaction, meaning, purpose, mattering, and future-oriented WB, such as hope and optimism, predict anti-establishment orientations more robustly than income, inflation, or standard economic risk indicators [24].

Japan provides a crucial empirical test of this mechanism. Longitudinal trend evidence from the World Happiness Report indicates that Japan's national WB declined almost continuously from 2012 to 2020. According to our data, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), WB dropped sharply due to social isolation and uncertainty. Although partial recovery followed social reopening (2022–2024), levels remained below pre-pandemic benchmarks, signaling a sustained erosion of evaluative and experiential WB.

This fragile plateau broke again in 2024. A rapid yen depreciation-driven inflation shock heightened living-cost anxieties, while a major political corruption scandal undermined institutional legitimacy. The synchronization of these shocks intensified WB and values depletion, probably associated with distrust, moral outrage, and diminished hope and optimism.

Importantly, populism did not surge during the COVID trough, when WB was the lowest, but legitimacy remained relatively stable. Instead, populism escalated when long-term WB deterioration aligned with legitimacy collapse, making negative affect and future pessimism politically mobilizable. This clarifies why Japan's 2025 House of Councillors election constitutes a structural tipping point: reduced life satisfaction, diminished values such as meaning and mattering, and diminished hope/optimism formed the conditions that allowed outsider parties to convert personal grievances into political action.

This pattern aligns with comparative theories suggesting that long-term declines in experiential and value-based WB predispose citizens to interpret politics through simplified moral boundaries and to adopt elite-blame narratives. Related research on well-being and political judgment further indicates that deteriorating WB heightens sensitivity to moralized or dualistic interpretations of public affairs. Resentment supplies a simplified interpretive schema through which diffuse dissatisfaction becomes politically vectorized.

Our analysis proceeds across three interconnected layers:

1. Party-support level:

Parties whose supporters exhibit lower WB and values—including meaning, mattering, and hope/optimism—display higher populism and gained more seats in 2025.

2. Electoral behavior:

WB depletion predicts outsider populist voting more strongly than ideology, demographics, or economic dissatisfaction.

In Japan, WB depletion encompasses both evaluative WB (SWLS) and affective WB (negative emotions, including greater anger, anxiety, and sadness), as captured by PERMA emotion items. Hope and optimism depletion likely amplifies emotional vulnerability by weakening expectations of improvement and reinforcing perceptions of stagnation. Although this mechanism is not directly tested here, it aligns with broader theories in political psychology linking future-oriented WB to political discontent.

Accordingly, the 2025 populist shift can be interpreted as the political expression of a decade-long erosion in subjective and existential well-being, rendered salient by acute legitimacy shocks and articulated through resentment-oriented narratives.

In this interpretation, hope and optimism operate as forward-looking lenses that shape when and for how long-term depletion becomes politically meaningful.

5.2 Individual-level mechanisms: WB depletion and resentment-based populist attitudes

At the individual level, well-being (WB) depletion functions as a core psychological pathway that heightens susceptibility to resentment and predisposes individuals toward populist cognition. This inference is grounded in the convergence between individual-level associations and party-level compositional patterns. Although the magnitude of these associations varies depending on levels of aggregation, the underlying directional relationship remains substantively consistent.

This interpretation aligns with international research demonstrating that erosion of subjective well-being increases vulnerability to resentment-based political judgments and simplified elite-people antagonism [9]. Rather than treating resentment as a primary emotional cause, the present framework conceptualizes it as an affective manifestation of deeper deficits in evaluative and existential well-being.

5.2.1 WB depletion → higher populist attitudes

Empirical analyses confirm that lower evaluative well-being (SWLS), together with reduced positive emotion and meaning (PERMA-P and PERMA-M), is systematically associated with stronger populist attitudes in Japan. These associations persist across partisan compositions, even though their apparent magnitude shifts when aggregation effects are taken into account.

Importantly, the empirical structure of the data indicates that SWLS and Meaning do not function as the independent predictors. Rather, additional components of well-being—including relational well-being (PERMA-R) and perceived accomplishment

(PERMA-A)—show strong, systematic correlations with both evaluative and existential well-being (see Appendix E). Together, these dimensions constitute an integrated multi-dimensional well-being system.

Similarly, value-based well-being indicators, such as mattering/recognition and future-oriented expectations (hope and optimism), show robust interrelations with SWLS and Meaning (Appendix E). A supplementary regression analysis further confirms that Meaning is strongly associated with SWLS even after controlling for basic demographics, supporting the interpretation that evaluative and existential well-being are structurally intertwined rather than independent psychological domains (Appendix J).

Taken together, these findings provide coherent empirical support for a structural well-being depletion model, in which evaluative, affective, existential, relational, and capability-based dimensions of well-being function as a tightly coupled psychological architecture. Declines across this architecture jointly heighten susceptibility to populist cognition, without requiring each component to be specified as a separate micro-level causal pathway.

Consistent with this individual-level structure, descriptive patterns observed at the aggregate party level also suggest that electoral gains tend to concentrate among parties whose supporter bases exhibit lower overall well-being. Although such aggregate-level analyses are necessarily exploratory due to limited observations, the convergence between individual-level psychological mechanisms and party-level electoral patterns supports the interpretation that well-being depletion operates as an upstream condition shaping populist mobilization rather than a downstream consequence of political alignment.

5.2.2 Why aggregate correlations are misleading: Simpson's paradox

At the individual level, zero-order correlations between well-being (WB) indicators and populist attitudes are modest and slightly positive. Taken at face value, this pattern appears to contradict the study's central claim.

However, this apparent inconsistency represents a textbook case of Simpson's paradox. Large mainstream parties—such as the LDP, CDP (the Constitutional Democratic Party), and Komeito—tend to attract support from individuals with relatively higher average well-being, while simultaneously exhibiting the moderate levels of populist orientation. When such parties dominate the sample, their compositional weight mechanically inflates the aggregate individual-level correlation.

Once this compositional heterogeneity is taken into account by examining patterns at the party-support level, a markedly different structure emerges. Parties characterized by lower average well-being among their supporters consistently display higher levels of populist orientation. This aggregate pattern reverses the individual-level association and aligns with recent findings from Western democracies, which similarly document a negative relationship between collective well-being and populist mobilization [24].

Figure 3 visualizes this structural reversal by plotting party-level well-being against populist orientation, while **Figure 4** extends the analysis to electoral outcomes, illustrating how well-being depletion at the supporter-base level is associated with subsequent seat gains in the 2025 election.

This figure plots party-level mean well-being (SWLS) against the mean level of populist orientation. While individual-level correlations between well-being and populist attitudes appear modestly positive due to compositional heterogeneity, the party-level pattern reveals a clear negative gradient. Parties whose supporter bases exhibit lower average well-being tend to display higher levels of populist orientation, illustrating a structural reversal consistent with Simpson's paradox.

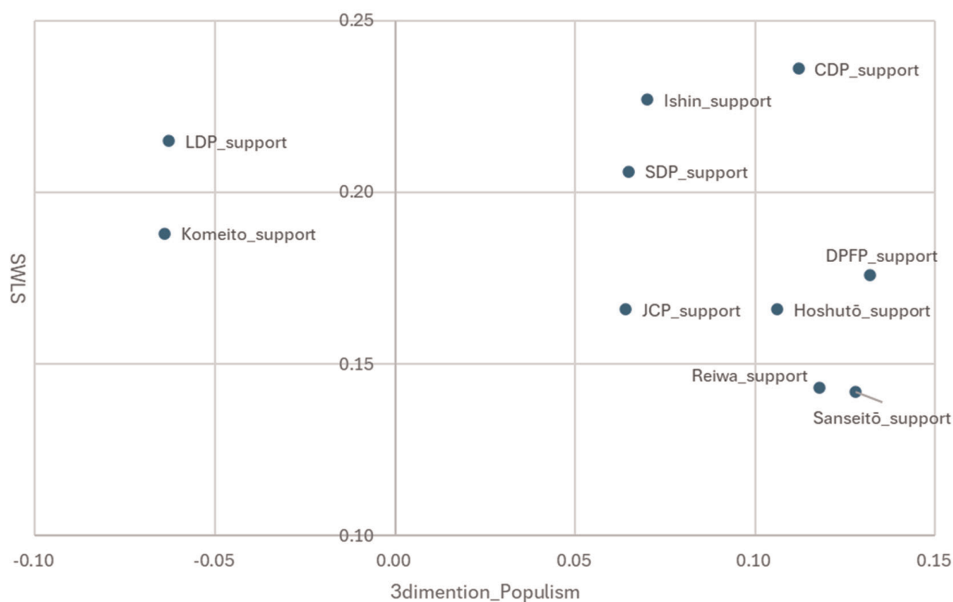


Figure 3. Party-level correlations between well-being and populist attitudes. Note. Each point represents a political party, plotted using supporter-base means. Well-being is measured using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), and populist orientation is measured using the three-dimensional composite populism index. Values shown next to party labels indicate mean SWLS scores. This figure is presented for descriptive and illustrative purposes, highlighting cross-party compositional patterns rather than individual-level associations.

5.3 Well-being and value depletion as the predictors of electoral outcomes

Party-level analyses reveal a coherent and robust pattern across Japan's 2025 House of Councillors election: parties supported by citizens with lower levels of well-being (WB) systematically gained seats, whereas parties with higher-WB supporter bases tended to lose seats.

This relationship holds across both proportional-representation (PR) and district ballots and remains robust when demographic composition and ideological positioning are taken into account.

Supplementary analyses further corroborate this pattern. In particular, core WB components—most notably evaluative well-being (SWLS) and meaning (PERMA-M)—exhibit consistent party-level associations with both populist orientation and electoral seat change (see Appendix L for correlation tables and auxiliary analyses).

Taken together, these findings integrate:

- cross-party well-being profiles,
- patterns of seat gain and loss,
- consistency across PR and district ballots, and
- models controlling for demographic factors.

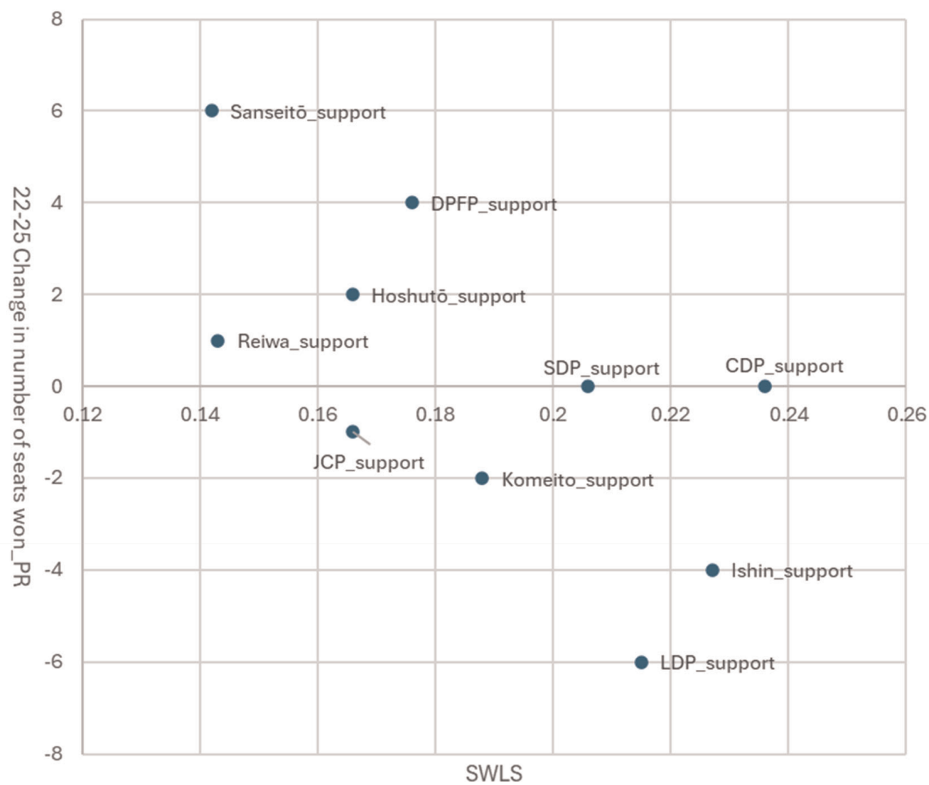


Figure 4. Well-being depletion and seat gains in the 2025 Japanese House of Councillors Election (Proportional Representation). Note. This figure plots party-level mean SWLS against PR seat change in the 2025 House of Councillors election. The distribution reveals a negative gradient, with lower supporter well-being associated with seat gains. Similar patterns in single-member districts (not shown) indicate that this relationship is not confined to the PR tier.

5.3.1 Well-being depletion and electoral expansion

Across the Japanese party system, electoral outcomes follow a clear well-being gradient.

Parties whose supporter bases score lower on key WB indicators show greater electoral expansion, while those supported by higher WB constituencies exhibit stagnation or seat loss.

Specifically, three WB indicators demonstrate empirically confirmed negative associations with party-level seat change:

- Lower evaluative well-being (SWLS) → greater seat gain
- Lower positive emotion (PERMA-P) → greater seat gain
- Lower meaning (PERMA-M) → greater seat gain

These associations are observed most clearly in PR results (**Figure 4**), with district-level outcomes exhibiting substantively similar patterns (not shown). The

convergence across electoral systems indicates that well-being depletion—rather than institutional mechanics—drives electoral volatility among outsider populist parties.

5.3.1.1 Extensions to other well-being and values dimensions

The core electoral analyses in this section focus on evaluative well-being (SWLS) as the primary indicator of well-being depletion, given its conceptual clarity and established use in political psychology.

Meaning-related indicators (PERMA-M) are examined in supplementary analyses, confirming that existential meaning follows patterns parallel to SWLS in relation to populist orientation and seat change (see Appendix J).

Beyond these focal indicators, the additional components of well-being and value orientation—including mattering/recognition, hope, optimism, inner richness, material orientation, and sacralization—are examined through correlational analyses. These variables exhibit strong, theoretically coherent interrelations with SWLS and Meaning, suggesting that they form part of a broader multidimensional well-being and value ecology.

While these dimensions are not introduced as the independent predictors of electoral outcomes in the present models, their systematic correlations provide convergent support for the broader WB-values depletion framework advanced in this chapter. Full correlation matrices are reported in Appendix E.

5.3.1.2 Clarifying cases

Two parties help illustrate the general WB gradient:

- *DPFP* aligns with the “WB depletion → seat-gain model” despite its moderate ideological profile.
- *Ishin* shows “high WB → seat loss,” indicating that stylistic populism does not override underlying psychological structure.

At the aggregate party level, a complementary pattern further reinforces this interpretation.

Appendix M further illustrates that parties with stronger populist orientations tended to achieve greater proportional-representation seat gains, a pattern that is descriptively consistent with the well-being–based structural pathway identified in the main analyses.

Thus:

WB depletion—evaluative, affective, and experiential—is the most consistent psychological predictor of electoral expansion in the 2025 election.

Figure 4 visualizes this gradient, showing that seat gains rise systematically as WB declines. **Table 1** presents an interpretive summary of **Figure 3**.

This pattern demonstrates that well-being functions as a primary latent axis structuring the Japanese party system in 2025.

The figure below presents the relationship between parties’ average well-being profile (SWLS) and their seat gains in the 2025 election. It visually demonstrates that WB depletion is the most consistent predictor of electoral expansion. While **Figure 3** reports proportional-representation outcomes for clarity and comparability, equivalent analyses using district-level seat changes yield substantively similar well-being gradients, indicating that the observed pattern is not specific to the electoral tier.

WB Level	Parties	2025 seat outcome
Lowest WB	Sanseitō, Reiwa	Large or moderate gains
Low-Mid WB	Hoshutō, DPFP	Moderate or Large gains
Low-Mid WB	JCP	Losses
Mid WB	LDP, Komeito	Losses
High WB	CDP, Ishin	Stagnation or losses

Table 1.
WB-seat gain gradient (interpretive summary).

5.3.2 Meaning, mattering, and Eudaimonic/relational depletion: Structural Elaboration of the WB-Seat Gain Gradient

While the preceding section established a robust association between evaluative well-being (SWLS) and electoral outcomes, it is important to clarify what this depletion represents at a deeper psychological level.

Party-level descriptive profiles (see Appendix L and Appendix M) suggest that seat-gaining parties are not characterized by low life satisfaction alone. Rather, they tend to exhibit lower levels of:

- multi-dimensional well-being (PERMA),
- coherence, purpose, and significance (3DM),
- perceived mattering and social recognition,
- inner richness and virtue orientation,
- hope and optimism.

These patterns, taken together, are consistent with the interpretation that electoral volatility in the 2025 election reflects a broader erosion of existential and future-oriented psychological resources, rather than fluctuations in affect or satisfaction alone.

In this sense, evaluative well-being functions as a summary indicator of deeper value-based and eudaimonic/relational depletion. The detailed structure of these values and meaning dimensions is examined more systematically in the following sections.

5.3.3 District vs. PR voting

Both district and PR ballots exhibit the same WB-based alignment: Parties whose supporters show lower well-being receive higher levels of outsider populist support in both tiers.

Although the present study does not conduct a formal comparative analysis of electoral-system differences, the observed patterns are substantively similar across district and PR results.

5.3.4 The DPFP puzzle revisited: Reframing it as a theoretical probe

DPFP displays:

- moderate well-being (WB) depletion
- moderate negative affect
- moderately low optimism
- relatively high populist orientation

→ producing significant seat gains in 2025.

At first glance, DPFP appears anomalous. Unlike resentment-driven or sacralized populist parties, it lacks strong negative emotional intensity, symbolic antagonism, or overt moral polarization. However, this apparent moderation is precisely what makes DPFP analytically important.

DPFP functions as a theoretical probe rather than an exception. Its electoral expansion occurred not despite its relatively subdued affective profile, but because its supporter base occupies a vulnerable intermediate position within the broader well-being depletion gradient. Moderate depletion of evaluative well-being, combined with weakened future-oriented resources—particularly optimism—was sufficient to render dissatisfaction electorally mobilizable, even in the absence of highly charged resentment or sacralized narratives.

This interpretation is consistent with DPFP's campaign strategy, which emphasized concrete income-related proposals—such as raising take-home pay and addressing income thresholds—rather than symbolic or moralized appeals. These policy signals can be understood as attempts to restore future-oriented capability by offering credible pathways for economic predictability, thereby mobilizing voters experiencing moderate well-being depletion without triggering resentment-based or sacralized populist dynamics.

In this sense, DPFP illustrates a distinct pathway of populist alignment driven by instrumental economic reassurance rather than emotional polarization or identity-based mobilization. DPFP thus confirms—rather than challenges—the central proposition of this chapter: well-being and value depletion, not ideological extremity or populist style alone, structured Japan's 2025 electoral realignment.

This finding also anticipates the multi-dimensional typology developed in Part II. DPFP occupies an intermediate configuration between vulnerability-based populism and reform-oriented dissatisfaction, illustrating how distinct populist pathways can emerge from different combinations of affective strain and value-based resources, even in the absence of strong sacralization, as conceptualized in the three-axis framework developed in Part II.

5.3.5 Summary

Well-being and values depletion—evaluative, experiential, existential, and future-oriented—is a consistent and powerful predictor of support for outsider populist parties in Japan's 2025 election.

Thus:

Populist voting in Japan appears to be structured more by emotional-existential--future-oriented vulnerability than by conventional ideological alignment.

6. Results Part II: Psychological differentiation - Emotional and value-based structures

While Part I demonstrated that well-being (WB) and value depletion constitute the structural basis of populist expansion in 2025, these mechanisms alone do not fully account for the heterogeneity of Japanese populism. Populist parties differ not only in the degree of WB decline but also in the internal composition of their emotional and psychological profiles.

In particular, WB should not be understood as a single undifferentiated condition. Evaluative and affective components of WB display partially distinct party-level patterns, and these differences interact with value-based resources in shaping political behavior. This section, therefore, examines the emotional structure of WB before turning to value-based and future-oriented psychological configurations.

For conceptual clarity, the psychological architecture developed in this part is organized along three analytically distinct axes.

Axis A captures affective well-being, focusing on emotional balance versus depletion.

Axis B represents value-based resources, encompassing intrinsic meaning, recognition, ethical-spiritual orientation, future-oriented capability, and their inverse materialist-hedonic orientations.

Axis C refers to sacralization, capturing moralized and pseudo-religious orientations toward sanctity, purity, and national-cultural symbolism.

In sum, Axis A reflects affective conditions, Axis B captures value-based and future-oriented resources, and Axis C specifies whether these psychological resources are translated into politics through secular or sacralized symbolic orders.

While these axes are empirically interrelated, they are treated as conceptually distinct dimensions in order to clarify the multiple psychological pathways through which populist formations emerge. These axes provide an organizing framework for the analysis that follows.

6.1 Axis A: Affective well-being and emotional structure

The PERMA framework reveals a layered emotional architecture underlying populist support. While overall well-being shows a clear depletion gradient across parties, specific components—such as relational well-being—show more differentiated distributions. The analysis in this section focuses on affective patterns that function as a shared emotional substrate across different populist formations.

These emotional configurations correspond closely to the well-being gradients visualized in **Figure 3** and the seat-gain gradients depicted in **Figure 4**, underscoring the integrated relationship between affective depletion and populist mobilization across the Japanese party system.

As **Table 2** indicates, Axis A captures affective resources and emotional strain, distinguishing overall emotional valence from threat-related negative affect.

6.1.1 The P/N axis (positive vs. negative affect)

A clear affective gradient distinguishes populist clusters. Negative affect is not uniformly elevated across populist parties; rather, distinct negative-emotion profiles emerge. Sanseitō ranks high primarily on anger (second highest), whereas its anxiety and sadness levels fall in the mid-to-lower range (around fifth to sixth). By contrast,

Sub-dimension (Axis A)	Core indicators	Interpretive meaning
A1. Positive vs. Negative Affect	Positive affect / Negative affect	Overall emotional valence and affective resources
A2. Anxiety-Anger-Sadness	Anxiety, anger, sadness	Emotional strain and threat-oriented affect

Table 2.
Axis A: Affective resources and emotional strain.

Hoshutō shows broadly elevated negative affect, including higher anxiety and sadness alongside anger.

On the positive side, positive affect is low among Sanseitō and Hoshutō (ranking eighth and seventh, respectively), while it is highest among CDP and Ishin, indicating that reform-oriented or mainstream opposition support can coexist with comparatively higher positive affect (Appendix G).

Taken together, these affective profiles clarify that the divide is not reducible to a simple “populist = high negative affect” pattern. Instead, parties cluster through (i) low positive affect combined with (ii) selectively elevated negative emotions, with anger playing a particularly salient role for Sanseitō, and a broader negative-affect elevation characterizing Hoshutō.

6.1.2 Triadic structure of negative emotion: Anxiety, anger, and sadness

The three components of negative emotion relate to populist attitudes at varying intensities (Appendix K) and exhibit party-specific profiles rather than moving in lockstep. Anxiety exhibits the strongest association, followed by anger, while sadness remains statistically significant but comparatively weaker.

These findings indicate that Japanese resentment cannot be reduced to anger alone. Instead, it takes the form of a *triadic but asymmetrically weighted emotional syndrome*—in which anxiety functions as the central activating condition, anger as a mobilizing and expressive response, and sadness as a diffuse background of affective depletion. As shown in **Figure 5**, parties characterized by low overall affective well-being cluster at the high-populism end of this emotional spectrum, providing a shared emotional background for the divergent populist pathways analyzed in subsequent sections.

6.2 Axis B: Value-based resources and future orientation

Beyond affective differences, parties are sharply differentiated by a broad cluster of value-based and future-oriented psychological resources. These include intrinsic and eudaimonic values, social recognition and life anchoring, ethical-spiritual orientation, and future-oriented capability, as well as their inverse—hedonic and materialist orientations.

Empirically, these indicators are strongly interrelated (see Appendix H) and can be conceptualized as sub-dimensions of a single integrated axis of value-based resources (Axis B), rather than as independent or competing value orientations. This axis captures the extent to which political supporters experience their lives as meaningful, socially recognized, ethically grounded, and future-oriented, in contrast to orientations centered on immediate pleasure or material accumulation. Importantly, Axis B is

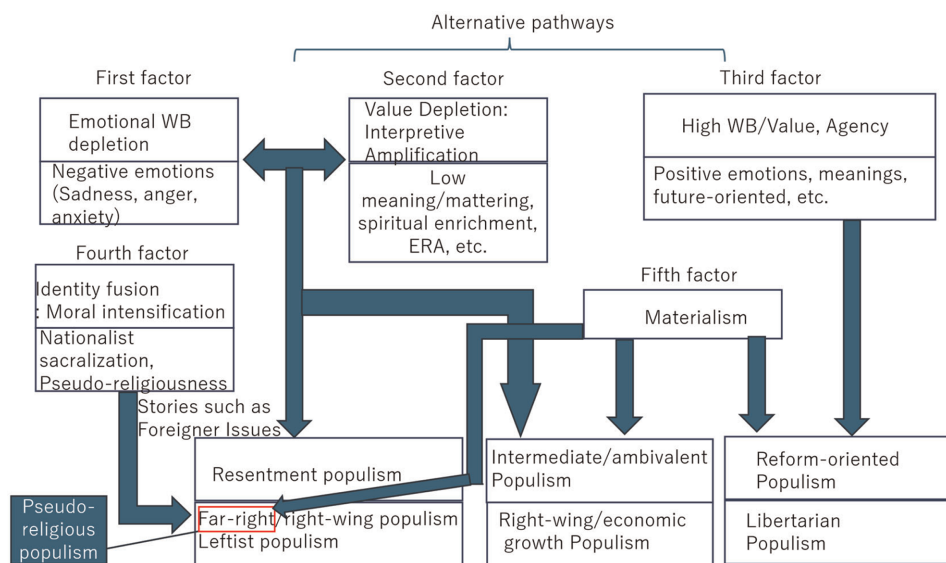


Figure 5.
Psychological factors associated with populist configurations in Japan.

analytically distinct from Axis C (sacralization), which captures a qualitatively different mode of moralized political orientation.

Although this study conceptually draws on the PERMA framework, its analytical axes do not map mechanically onto the full PERMA model. As shown in Appendix E, all PERMA components (P, E, R, M, A), SWLS, General Well-Being, hope, optimism, mattering, and 3DM are highly and consistently intercorrelated, confirming that they jointly constitute a multi-dimensional well-being (WB) structure.

For analytical clarity, however, the present framework disaggregates the integrated WB structure into its political-psychological *functions* (Appendix F). Positive and negative emotions (PERMA-P, together with anxiety, anger, and sadness) are incorporated into Axis A as affective resources, whereas meaning in life (PERMA-M) constitutes the core of Axis B as a value-based, future-orienting resource. Engagement, relationships, and accomplishment (PERMA-E, R, A), despite their strong correlations with other WB indicators, are treated as background life-functioning variables that support overall well-being but do not directly structure political interpretation.

Table 3 indicates party-level differences in these value-based profiles, revealing a clear gradient across the Japanese party system. In general, parties associated with resentment-based populism occupy the lowest positions on Axis B, whereas stable or reform-oriented parties exhibit higher levels of value-based resources.

6.2.1 Sub-dimensions of Axis B: Value-based resources

Although Axis B can be treated as a single integrated dimension, the empirical results indicate several analytically meaningful sub-dimensions. These sub-dimensions help explain variation among parties that otherwise appear similar in overall well-being profiles.

Sub-dimension (Axis B)	Core indicators	Highest parties	Lowest parties	Interpretive meaning
B1. Eudaimonic Values	Meaning, 3DM, inner richness, virtue, post-materialism, eudaimonia	CDP	Sanseitō, Hoshutō	Normative core of value-based resources
B2. Recognition & Life Anchoring	Mattering, <i>ikigai</i>	Ishin, CDP, Komeito	Sanseitō, Hoshutō	Relational–Existential Anchoring
B3. Ethical-Spiritual Orientation (Non-Sacralized)	Spirituality	Komeito, CDP	Sanseitō, Hoshutō	Ethical depth without sacralization
B4. Future-Oriented Capability	Hope, optimism	Ishin, LDP, CDP	Sanseitō, Hoshutō	Forward-looking efficacy and agency
B5. Materialist-Hedonic Orientation (Inverse Pole)	Hedonia, materialism, material richness	DPFP, Sanseitō	CDP, JCP	Instrumental and material focus

Note. Political sacralization (Axis C) is not included as a sub-dimension in this table, as it functions as a moral-symbolic modifier rather than a value-based psychological resource. Axis C is analyzed separately in Section 5.6.

Table 3.
Axis B: Integrated value-based resources and future orientation.

(B1) *Eudaimonic Values*

This sub-dimension captures intrinsic orientations toward meaning, purpose, ethical self-cultivation, and inner richness, emphasizing intrinsic goods rather than instrumental or material rewards. Although relational well-being is conceptually adjacent to the affective dimension examined in Axis A, it is not treated here as a core value-based resource, as its party-level distribution differs from that of eudaimonic values.

Across these indicators, supporters of CDP score highest, while resentment-based populist parties—particularly Sanseitō and Hoshutō—occupy the lowest end of the distribution. B1 thus serves as the normative anchor for Axis B.

(B2) *Recognition and Life Anchoring*

A second sub-dimension centers on perceived social recognition and concrete life anchoring, operationalized through mattering and *ikigai*. These indicators display more heterogeneous party-level patterns, reflecting practical embeddedness in social roles and everyday life rather than abstract value orientation alone.

(B3) *Ethical–Spiritual Orientation (Non-Sacralized)*

This sub-dimension captures ethical and spiritual depth that is not necessarily fused in exclusionary or national sacralization. It is most clearly expressed in spirituality measures, where Komeito and CDP supporters score relatively highly. This form of ethical-spiritual orientation remains analytically distinct from the sacralized moralization examined under Axis C.

(B4) Future-Oriented Capability

Future-Oriented Capability combines hope, optimism, and perceived agency, capturing a forward-looking sense of efficacy and possibility. This sub-dimension plays a key role in differentiating reform-oriented populism (Type 3), where high well-being is coupled with strong agency, from vulnerability-based populist configurations.

(B5) Materialist–Hedonic Orientation (Inverse Pole of Axis B)

Finally, materialist and hedonic orientations form the inverse pole of Axis B. These orientations contrast sharply with eudaimonic values and help explain why parties with stronger materialist-hedonic profiles align more closely with vulnerability-based or resentment-driven populist pathways.

6.2.2 Integrated interpretation of Axis B

Taken together, these sub-dimensions confirm that Axis B represents a composite structure of value-based psychological resources, rather than a single narrow trait. Parties differ not only in their overall level of value-based resources but also in the internal configuration of these resources. This internal differentiation explains why parties such as CDP, Ishin, Komeito, and LDP can occupy relatively high positions on Axis B while nonetheless exhibiting distinct political styles, institutional roles, and relationships to populism.

Table 3 summarizes these configurations by mapping populist types onto Axis B and its sub-dimensions (B1–B5). Their typical relationship to political sacralization (Axis C) is indicated analytically but examined in detail in the following section, where sacralization is treated as a modifying dimension rather than a value-based resource.

Having established Axis B and its sub-dimensions, the following subsections translate this integrated value-based structure into party-level profiles, clarifying how different parties occupy distinct positions within the same psychological resource architecture.

6.2.3 Lowest value-based resources: Deep existential depletion

Sanseitō and Hoshutō occupy the extreme low end of Axis B, showing severe depletion across B1–B4 combined with a strong inverse orientation on B5. This configuration corresponds to deep existential depletion and explains why these parties appear at the lowest end of overall well-being in **Figure 3** and drive the strongest seat gains in **Figure 4**.

6.2.4 Moderate value-based resources: Vulnerable but not collapsed (DPFP)

DPFP occupies an intermediate position on Axis B, characterized by partial depletion of B1 and B2, selectively preserved capability on B4, and a relatively strong orientation toward B5. This profile aligns with its position in **Figure 3**—moderately low Axis A combined with high populism—and helps explain its seat gains in **Figure 4**: not extreme resentment, but sufficient resource depletion to translate dissatisfaction into electoral volatility.

6.2.5 Highest value-based resources: Meaning, capability, and stability

Supporters of Ishin, CDP, and JCP occupy the upper range of Axis B, with strong positioning on B1–B4 and weak alignment with the inverse materialist–hedonic pole (B5). These parties cluster in the high-resource region of **Figure 3**, and their relatively weak seat performance in **Figure 4** reflects the psychological stability of their supporter bases.

Ishin is especially notable: High Axis B combined with strong B4 (future-oriented capability) corresponds to reform-oriented populism rather than resentment-based mobilization.

6.2.6 Comparative interpretation

The value-based resource gradient identified in this section divides the Japanese party system into coherent psychological blocs. Parties differ not only in their overall level of resources, but in how affective conditions (Axis A), value-based resources (Axis B), and sacralization (Axis C) combine to generate distinct populist configurations.

DPFP occupies an intermediate position on this gradient, reflecting vulnerability without full collapse. Ishin, by contrast, combines high Axis B—especially B4—with affective stability, producing an agency-driven, reform-oriented populist pathway. Center-left parties such as CDP and JCP exhibit high Axis B combined with affective balance, corresponding to relative stability rather than vulnerability-driven mobilization.

Resentment-based populist formations occupy the opposite end of the gradient. Far-right parties such as Sanseitō and Hoshutō combine severe depletion on Axis A and Axis B with elevated Axis C, producing a moralized and identity-laden form of populism distinct from both non-sacralized resentment (Type 1A) and intermediate populism (Type 2).

These configurations are formalized in the multi-dimensional typology presented in Part III, where populist formations are classified along Axis A (affective well-being), Axis B (value-based resources), and Axis C (sacralization). The resulting typology closely matches the spatial distributions observed in **Figure 3** and explains why the seat-gain pattern in **Figure 4** follows a clear gradient of psychological resource depletion.

6.3 Axis C: Political sacralization (pseudo-sacred moralization) without intrinsic meaning

Building on the typology summarized in **Table 4**, this section examines Axis C—Political Sacralization—as a critical modifier that differentiates otherwise similar low-well-being populist formations. Axis C consists of two analytically distinct sub-dimensions:

Sub-dimension (Axis C)	Core indicators	Interpretive meaning
C1. Religiosity	Religious commitment, practice	Institutionalized sacred orientation
C2. (Pseudo-)Sacredness	Sacred values, moral absolutism	Sacralization of political boundaries

Table 4.
Axis C: Political pseudo-sacralization.

- C1: Conventional Religiosity, referring to religious commitment and institutional practice;
- C2: Political (Pseudo-)Sacralization, referring to the moral absolutization and sacral framing of political identity, cultural boundaries, and national symbols.

While both dimensions relate to sacred orientation, they operate differently in the Japanese case.

Empirically, variation across parties is driven primarily by C2 rather than C1. Conventional religiosity (C1) does not systematically distinguish far-right populist formations from other parties. Instead, it is the degree of political pseudo-sacralization (C2)—the framing of political claims as sacred, pure, and non-negotiable—that differentiates them.

Axis C therefore captures not religiosity per se, but a symbolic intensification of political identity. Political pseudo-sacralization mimics religious sacrality while remaining weakly grounded in intrinsic meaning, ethical self-cultivation, or lived spirituality.

Sanseitō and Hoshutō score the highest on Axis C, particularly on C2. Yet these same parties occupy the lowest positions on Axis B (value-based resources) and align strongly with its inverse pole (B5). This configuration indicates that their sacralization does not reflect a coherent spiritual or ethical worldview grounded in meaning, inner richness, or virtue. Rather, it functions as a compensatory mechanism: pseudo-sacred moralization often observed under conditions of depleted value-based resources.

In this configuration, sacred language and purity narratives operate as identity-intensifying devices. National, cultural, or moral symbols are elevated to sacred status precisely where other sources of meaning and recognition are weak or absent. Axis C thus acts as a moral amplifier of resentment-based populism, transforming diffuse dissatisfaction into absolutist claims resistant to compromise and pluralism.

By contrast, parties such as CDP and JPS combine relatively high positioning on Axis B—especially B1 (eudaimonic values) and B3 (ethical-spiritual orientation)—with consistently low scores on Axis C. This contrast underscores a critical analytical distinction: Ethical-spiritual depth (Axis B3) is not equivalent to political sacralization (Axis C). In these parties, spirituality is embedded within broader value-based resources rather than mobilized as a boundary-defining political instrument.

Komeito occupies an intermediate configuration. Although its supporters exhibit relatively high ethical-spiritual orientation on Axis B3, their Axis C scores—particularly on C2—remain substantially lower than those observed among far-right populist parties. This pattern suggests a form of socially embedded and ethically grounded religiosity (C1 and B3) that does not translate into exclusionary or absolutist political sacralization (C2).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that political sacralization (Axis C) must not be conflated with religion or spirituality. Elevated C2 among far-right parties reflects political pseudo-sacralization rather than intrinsic religiosity. The distinction between C1 (religiosity) and C2 (pseudo-sacralization) clarifies how sacralized populism can coexist with shallow value structures, and why parties with stronger ethical-spiritual resources do not necessarily engage in sacralized political mobilization.

6.4 Integrated conclusion for part II

The emotional, value-based, and future-oriented profiles analyzed in Part II correspond closely to the empirical patterns shown in **Figure 3** (WB × Populism) and 4

(WB × Seat Gain). Together, they demonstrate that Japanese populism is structured less by ideological position than by distinct psychological ecologies combining affective conditions (Axis A), value-based resources (Axis B), and—crucially—the presence or absence of Political Sacralization (Political Sacralization/Pseudo-Sacred Moralization) (Axis C).

Three overarching conclusions emerge. First, populist formations differ not only in the severity of affective and value-based depletion but also in how vulnerability is interpreted through symbolic and moral frameworks. Second, resentment-based populism becomes most electorally potent when low positioning on Axis B is coupled with high Axis C, producing political pseudo-sacralization that intensifies moral boundaries and reduces tolerance for compromise. Third, parties characterized by higher value-based resources—especially strong eudaimonic values (B1), ethical-spiritual orientation (B3), and future-oriented capability (B4)—tend to exhibit more stable or reform-oriented political profiles, even when they employ populist rhetoric.

This integrated psychological architecture provides the foundation for the multi-dimensional typology developed in Part III, in which populist pathways are systematically classified along Axis A (affective well-being), Axis B (value-based resources), and Axis C (Political Sacralization/Pseudo-Sacred Moralization). It also clarifies why sacralization functions as a decisive modifier of populist intensity in some cases while remaining largely absent in others, despite the comparable levels of ethical or spiritual orientation.

7. Results Part III: Typology of Japanese populism - A multi-dimensional psychological architecture

7.1 Typology of Japanese populism: A multi-dimensional psychological classification of the 2025 landscape

A central contribution of this section is the development of a unified typology of Japanese populism grounded not in ideology, social cleavages, or policy platforms, but in underlying psychological architecture.

Section 5 identified a common empirical mechanism linking psychological conditions to political behavior: Multi-dimensional depletion of affective well-being and value-based resources is systematically associated with populist attitudes, outsider-party support, and subsequent seat gains. Yet this shared mechanism does not imply uniform psychological foundations across populist formations.

Sections 5–6 demonstrated substantial heterogeneity across three dimensions: affective profiles (Axis A), value-based resources and future orientation (Axis B), and political sacralization (Axis C). Taken together, these dimensions reveal that Japanese populism in 2025 cannot be reduced to a single grievance model. Rather, it reflects multiple psychological pathways structured by distinct combinations of affective strain, value depletion, and sacral intensification.

Building on these distinctions, contemporary political psychology suggests that political discontent is structured less by ideological positioning than by a continuum ranging from vulnerability to agency. Vulnerability is characterized by depleted affective well-being, diminished meaning and recognition, weak future-oriented capability, and heightened susceptibility to resentment. Agency, by contrast, reflects affective stability, perceived efficacy, optimism, and future-oriented confidence.

This vulnerability-agency continuum provides the interpretive backbone for situating Japanese parties within a unified psychological landscape. Populist formations may be located along this axis as follows:

Vulnerability → Intermediate/Ambivalence → Agency

This continuum resolves two empirical puzzles observed in the Japanese case. First, DPFP's intermediate configuration reflects psychological ambivalence rather than ideological incoherence: Its supporters exhibit partial depletion without full affective collapse. Second, Ishin's disruptive reformism is sustained by comparatively high agency and future-oriented capability, producing a mobilization pathway distinct from resentment-based vulnerability.

When integrated with the three-axis structure, the typology yields four broad configurations:

1. *Vulnerability-based sacralized populism* (high Axis A strain, low Axis B resources, high Axis C sacralization) → exemplified by Sanseitō and Hoshutō.
2. *Vulnerability-based non-sacral populism* (high Axis A strain, low Axis B resources, low Axis C) → elements observable within segments of Reiwa.
3. *Ambivalent reform populism* (moderate Axis A strain, mixed Axis B resources, low-to-moderate Axis C) → represented by DPFP.
4. *Agency-oriented reformism without sacralization* (low Axis A strain, higher Axis B resources, low Axis C) → exemplified by Ishin.

Mainstream parties such as CDP and Komeito occupy positions outside vulnerability-based populism, characterized by stronger value-based resources and comparatively low sacralization, though differing in affective profiles and institutional orientation.

Taken together, this typology demonstrates that Japanese populism in 2025 is best understood not as a singular ideological movement, but as a multi-dimensional psychological field structured by vulnerability, value ecology, and sacral intensification. Populist mobilization emerges where affective depletion converges with weakened value-based anchoring and, in some cases, amplified political sacralization. By contrast, agency-oriented configurations sustain reformist energy without reliance on resentment or pseudo-sacred boundary construction.

This framework provides a unified account of how psychological architecture—rather than ideological alignment alone—structures the Japanese party system in 2025.

7.2 Type 1: Resentment populism (super-category)

7.2.1 The emotional: Existential core of Japan's populist realignment

Type 1 constitutes a broad super-category defined by severe depletion on Axis A and Axis B. Across parties, this configuration is characterized by affective exhaustion, collapsed value-based resources (B1–B4), and heightened vulnerability. Importantly, this structure cuts across ideological lines, indicating that Japan's populist polarization is psychological rather than ideological.

Within this super-category, two distinct variants emerge depending on the presence or absence of Political Sacralization (Axis C).

7.2.2 Type 1A: Non-sacralized resentment populism

7.2.2.1 Representative formations: Reiwa; segments of JCP; low-WB wing of DPFP

Type 1A is defined by low positioning on Axis A and Axis B, combined with minimal Axis C. Supporters experience affective depletion and loss of meaning and recognition, but resentment is expressed primarily through socioeconomic and anti-establishment narratives rather than sacralized identity.

This configuration confirms that resentment-based populism can emerge independently of ideological content and without symbolic moral absolutization.

Axis placement:

- Axis A: low (affective depletion)
- Axis B: depleted (B1–B4)
- Axis C: low or absent

7.3 Type 1B: Sacralized resentment populism

7.3.1 Representative parties: Sanseitō; Hoshutō

Type 1B represents the fusion of extreme vulnerability with high Political Sacralization (Axis C). These parties occupy the lowest positions on Axis A and Axis B, combined with exceptionally high Axis C. Emotional and existential depletion is reframed through pseudo-sacred moral narratives centered on purity, spirituality, or national sanctity.

This configuration produces pseudo-sacred moralization: Resentment is intensified through sacralized symbolism and identity fusion, generating absolutist claims resistant to compromise and pluralism.

Axis placement:

- Axis A: extreme low (affective depletion)
- Axis B: collapsed (B1–B4)
- Axis C: extremely high (Political Sacralization)

7.4 Synthesis of type 1 variants

Together, Types 1A and 1B demonstrate that resentment is the primary psychological engine of Japan's populist realignment. The critical differentiator is Axis C: While Type 1A reflects non-sacralized vulnerability, Type 1B represents sacralized and identity-laden resentment.

7.5 Type 2: Intermediate/ambivalent populism

Representative party: Democratic Party for the People (DPFP).

Type 2 occupies an intermediate position across all three axes. DPFP supporters exhibit moderate affective depletion (Axis A), partial erosion of value-based resources

(Axis B), and low Political Sacralization (Axis C). This configuration produces ambivalence: Vulnerability is present, but not fully collapsed, and agency is selectively preserved.

This profile explains DPFP's electoral volatility without extreme resentment or moralized mobilization.

Axis placement:

- Axis A: mid–low (affective depletion)
- Axis B: moderate
- Axis C: low (Political Sacralization)

7.6 Type 3: Reform-oriented populism

7.6.1 Representative party: Ishin

Type 3 represents an agency-oriented reformist variant of populist mobilization. Ishin supporters occupy high positions on Axis A and Axis B, particularly B4 (future-oriented capability), while remaining low on Axis C. Dissatisfaction is expressed through reform ambition and modernization rather than resentment or identity politics.

This configuration distinguishes reform-oriented populism from vulnerability-driven pathways.

Axis placement:

- Axis A: high (affective depletion)
- Axis B: high (especially B4: future-oriented capability)
- Axis C: low (Political Sacralization)

7.7 Summary: Three psychological pathways to populism

1. Resentment-Based Populism (Type 1A/1B)

Low Axis A and Axis B; Type 1B distinguished by high Axis C → largest seat gains.

2. Intermediate/Ambivalent Populism (Type 2)

Moderate depletion with partial agency → electoral volatility

3. Reform-Oriented Populism (Type 3)

High Axis A and Axis B, low Axis C → limited or negative seat gains

Figure 6 situates political parties within a three-axis psychological space defined by Axis A (Affective Well-Being), Axis B (Value-Based Resources and Future-Oriented Capability), and Axis C (Political Sacralization), visualizing the relative positioning of populist formations across these dimensions (**Table 5**).

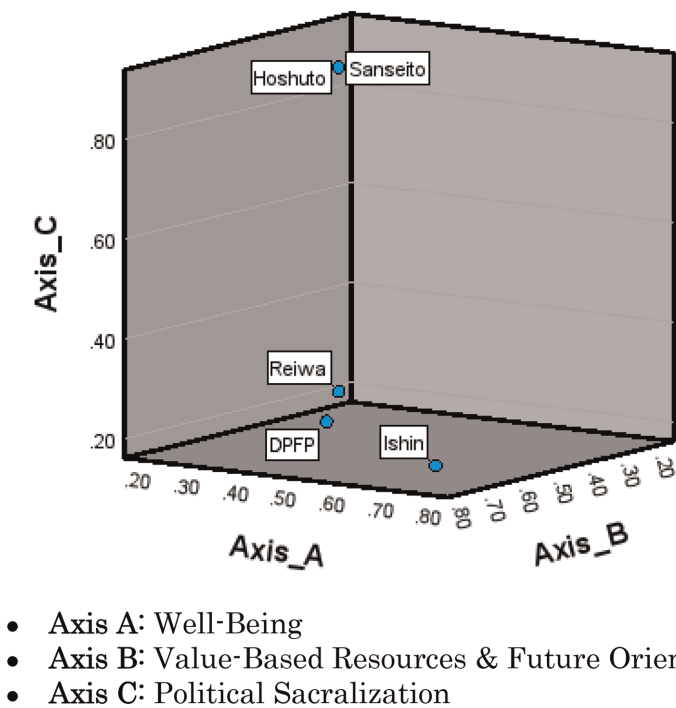


Figure 6.
A Three-Axis Psychological Map of Japanese Populism. This figure maps Japanese political parties within a three-axis psychological space defined by Axis A (Affective Well-Being), Axis B (Value-Based Resources and Future-Oriented Capability), and Axis C (Political Sacralization). Axis scores represent standardized party-level means based on supporters’ responses and are rescaled to a 0–1 range for visualization. The figure illustrates relative psychological positioning across parties rather than absolute measurement. Note. Axis scores represent standardized party-level means derived from supporters’ responses and are rescaled to 0–1 for visualization. The figure illustrates relative psychological positioning across parties rather than precise or absolute measurement. Accordingly, the categorical labels (e.g., low, middle, high) indicate relative positioning within the observed party system.

Party	Axis A	Axis B	Axis C
Reiwa	Low	Low	Low
Sanseito	Low	Low	High
Hoshutō	Low	Low	High
DPFP	Low or middle	Middle	Low
Ishin	High	High	Low

Note. The table summarizes the typical configurations of parties across the three analytical axes developed in this chapter: affective well-being (Axis A), value-based resources and future orientation (Axis B), and political sacralization (Axis C). The entries provide an interpretive synthesis of the empirical patterns discussed in the text rather than results of a separate statistical estimation.

Table 5.
Typological Summary of Populist Configurations Across Psychological Axes.

Reiwa, Sanseito, and Hoshutō are similarly low on both Axis A and Axis B, reflecting shared depletion of well-being and value-based resources. They are analytically distinguished only by Axis C, which captures the presence or absence of political sacralization. DPFP occupies an intermediate position, characterized by relatively low well-being but partially retained value-based and future-oriented resources, whereas

Populism type	Emotional well-being (Axis A)	Axis B: Value-based resources and future orientation (B1–B4)	Axis C: Political sacralization (pseudo-sacred moralization)	Psychological core
Resentment Populism (Type 1A) (Reiwa, low-WB DPFP segment)	Severe affective depletion (elevated sadness–anxiety–anger)	Very low intrinsic meaning and mattering; weak ethical–spiritual orientation; collapsed future-oriented capability	Low	Emotional and existential depletion without sacralization
Far-Right Sacralized Resentment (Type 1B) (Sanseitō, Hoshutō)	Extremely affective depletion (anger-dominant with broader anxiety-sadness elevation)	Severely depleted intrinsic meaning and mattering; strong materialist orientation; collapse of future-oriented capability	Very high	Pseudo-sacred moralization of resentment and identity fusion
Intermediate / Ambivalent Populism (Type 2) (DPFP)	Moderate affective strain	Moderate value-based resources; mixed orientations; partially weakened future-oriented capability	Low	Vulnerability with partial coherence and selective agency
Reform-Oriented Populism (Type 3) (Ishin)	Affective stability (Low negative/ High positive affect)	High intrinsic meaning and inner richness; strong future-oriented capability (hope, optimism, agency)	Low	Efficacy-driven, reform-oriented populism
Center-Left Stability (Reference) (CDP, JCP)	Stable affective balance	High intrinsic meaning and mattering; stable ethical–spiritual orientation; moderate future-oriented capability	Low	Stable intrinsic meaning and institutional orientation

Note: Although Axis B and Axis C are psychologically adjacent, they are analytically distinct. Axis B captures intrinsic value-based resources and future-oriented capability, whereas Axis C reflects political pseudo-sacralization—a moral-symbolic intensification that can emerge independently of intrinsic spiritual or ethical depth.

Table 6.
Multi-dimensional psychological typology of Japanese populism in the 2025 Election.

Ishin is located at the high end of Axes A and B, indicating a reform-oriented populist configuration grounded in agency and future-oriented capability.

Table 6 provides a categorical summary of the typology by specifying the psychological profiles and party alignments associated with each populist pathway identified in **Figure 6**.

8. Discussion: Affective-existential foundations of Japan’s 2025 populist realignment

8.1 Context of international research on populism

International research on populism has developed along three major explanatory trajectories.

8.1.1 The emotional activation model

A substantial body of political psychology emphasizes negative emotions, particularly anger, fear, and anxiety, as key triggers for political mobilization and anti-elite sentiment. Foundational work on affective intelligence conceptualizes emotions as mechanisms that activate political judgment under conditions of threat or uncertainty [25]. Subsequent research has shown that anger, in particular, facilitates blame attribution, out-group hostility, and confrontational forms of political participation [11]. Building on these insights, recent studies link negative emotions such as anger, fear, and anxiety more directly to populist attitudes, highlighting the emotional foundations of anti-elitism and exclusionary conceptions of 'the people' [23, 26]. Together, this literature frames populism as an affect-driven response to perceived injustice or threat, primarily emphasizing short-term emotional activation rather than longer-term experiential or value-based conditions.

8.1.2 The well-being (WB) decline model

A more recent line of research argues that subjective well-being deterioration—declines in life satisfaction, purpose, trust, and psychosocial stability—creates fertile conditions for populist demand [1, 2, 24, 27, 28]. This approach reframes populism as the political crystallization of deeper experiential distress.

8.1.3 The identity-value-meaning model

Other scholars emphasize value orientations and identity-based mechanisms, arguing that emotions and well-being must be situated within broader moral and meaning frameworks that structure political interpretation. A foundational contribution in this tradition is Ronald Inglehart's theory of value change, which links material and post-material values to perceptions of security, self-expression, and existential orientation [20, 29]. From this perspective, political attitudes—including susceptibility to populist appeals—are shaped not only by episodic emotions or short-term dissatisfaction, but by deeper value configurations and identity narratives that provide meaning and coherence.

Despite its wide influence, this value-based approach has rarely been integrated with psychological measures of well-being, meaning, and recognition at the individual level, particularly in non-Western democracies. As a result, the mechanisms through which value orientations translate into affective and electoral alignment remain insufficiently specified. The present study builds on this tradition by explicitly integrating value orientations with multi-dimensional well-being and meaning-based resources, thereby extending the identity-value-meaning framework into an empirically grounded model of populist alignment in contemporary Japan.

8.1.4 Contributions of the Japanese case

Japan's 2025 election provides clear non-Western evidence that affective and existential conditions precede resentment and predict support for outsider populist parties, demonstrating that the well-being-populism linkage is not confined to polarized Western democracies.

More importantly, the Japanese case advances international populism research by empirically integrating three major explanatory strands—emotional activation,

well-being decline, and value-based meaning—within a single psychological architecture. Rather than treating emotions, well-being, and values as parallel or competing explanations, the present analysis shows that negative affect becomes politically consequential, especially through depleted meaning, mattering, and future-oriented capability.

This contribution directly extends and refines structural theories of value change, most notably those associated with Inglehart. His work compellingly demonstrated that long-term shifts in existential security and material conditions shape generational value orientations and political preferences. However, the psychological mechanisms through which objective or macro-level conditions are translated into lived political meaning have remained comparatively under-specified.

The Japanese case provides a psychological micro-foundation for this tradition by showing that well-being, meaning, recognition, and perceived future agency mediate the relationship between structural conditions and political alignment. In this sense, the analysis moves beyond a direct link between objective security and value change, highlighting the role of psychological factors instead—captured through affective balance, meaning, and mattering—in shaping political interpretation and mobilization.

This distinction is particularly significant in the Japanese context. Despite relatively high education and physical security, substantial segments of the electorate exhibit erosion of meaning, recognition, and future-oriented capability. The findings thus demonstrate that objective conditions do not automatically translate into existential security and that deficits in subjective well-being can foster fertile ground for resentment-based, sacralized populist mobilization even in relatively stable democracies.

This interpretation is consistent with emerging international research showing that resentment operates not as a stable ideological trait, but as a dynamic reaction to perceived violations of fairness, dignity, and recognition. Recent US evidence similarly suggests that anger loses much of its predictive power once broader psychosocial malaise is accounted for; the Japanese case independently corroborates this integrated mechanism in a non-Western democratic setting.

Because the Japanese dataset captures affective states, value-based resources, future-oriented capability, and political sacralization simultaneously, it enables a rare specification of populism as a multi-axis psychological architecture rather than a single attitudinal dimension. Japan, therefore, functions not merely as an additional regional case but as a conceptual bridge that links and empirically grounds competing global models of populism.

In this sense, the Japanese case contributes to international research not by replicating Western findings, but by re-specifying the psychological foundations through which value change, emotional activation, and political meaning converge in contemporary populism.

8.2 Integrated structural interpretation: A multi-dimensional psychological architecture of Japanese populism

Bringing together the empirical patterns identified in Sections 5–7, this section articulates an integrated structural interpretation of contemporary Japanese populism. The alignment cannot be reduced to ideology, economic grievance, or demographic differentiation alone. Rather, it emerges from a shared psychological space structured by affective conditions, value-based resources, future-oriented capability, and symbolic moralization.

In the terms developed in Part II and formalized in Part III, the typology is generated by the interaction of three analytically distinct axes:

Axis A (Affective Well-Being): affective balance versus depletion, centering on negative affect and emotional exhaustion.

Axis B (Value-Based Resources and Future Orientation): the availability of value-based resources (B1–B4) and their inverse pole (B5), including meaning, recognition, ethical-spiritual orientation (non-sacralized), and future-oriented capability.

Axis C (Political Sacralization/Pseudo-Sacred Moralization): political pseudo-sacralization, capturing moral absolutization and identity fusion that mimic religious sacralization without intrinsic spirituality.

These axes do not constitute a linear causal sequence. Instead, they define a configurational psychological architecture within which distinct populist formations emerge. As shown in **Figure 5**, resentment-based mobilization (Types 1A and 1B), intermediate or ambivalent populism (Type 2), and agency-driven reform populism (Type 3) represent differentiated configurations within a common psychological space.

8.2.1 Axis A: Affective depletion as a background condition of vulnerability

Axis A represents a shared background condition of vulnerability underlying resentment-based populism. Elevated sadness, anxiety, and anger create an affective environment in which political dissatisfaction becomes more salient, a pattern most evident in Type 1 formations.

However, affective depletion alone does not determine the form populism takes. Its political direction depends on how affective strain is interpreted through value-based resources (Axis B) and intensified through symbolic moralization (Axis C). Axis A thus explains the *emergence of vulnerability*, but not its political crystallization.

8.2.2 Axis B: Value-based resources as the interpretive structure of dissatisfaction

Axis B captures the interpretive structure through which affective strain is translated into political meaning. Positions low on Axis B—reflecting depleted value-based resources across B1–B4 and, in many cases, alignment toward the inverse pole (B5)—are associated with vulnerability-driven populist pathways. High Axis B, by contrast, supports normatively constrained or reform-oriented responses to dissatisfaction.

Axis B, therefore, explains why actors sharing similar affective conditions on Axis A can diverge politically: It shapes whether dissatisfaction is interpreted through resentment, symbolic moralization, or constructive reform.

8.2.3 Axis B4: Future-oriented capability as the basis of reform-oriented populism

Within Axis B, future-oriented capability (B4) most clearly differentiates reform-oriented populism from resentment-based variants. High levels of hope, optimism, and perceived agency—most prominently observed among Ishin supporters—redirect dissatisfaction away from rupture and toward reformist ambition, efficacy, and institutional engagement.

This dimension explains how relatively high well-being can coexist with populist mobilization, producing an agency-driven rather than resentment-driven pathway.

8.2.4 Axis C: Political sacralization as a moral amplifier of resentment

Axis C functions as a modifier rather than a base condition. Elevated political sacralization intensifies resentment by transforming symbolic boundaries into moral absolutes. In Type 1B formations, political pseudo-sacralization amplifies affective and existential depletion into identity fusion and absolutist political framings.

This interaction clarifies why multiple forms of populism coexisted in Japan's 2025 election despite shared macro-level conditions: While Axis A generates vulnerability and Axis B structures interpretation, Axis C magnifies resentment into its most moralized and polarized form.

8.2.5 Psychological factors underlying affective-existential-moral configurations

Rather than positing a temporal causal pathway, this section organizes empirically observed psychological factors associated with distinct populist formations in Japan's 2025 realignment. Drawing on Sections 5–7, **Figure 5** summarizes these factors as a configurational architecture.

Factor 1—Affective Depletion (Axis A).

Elevated sadness, anxiety, and anger constitute a shared background condition of psychological vulnerability associated with stronger populist orientations.

Factor 2—Meaning and Recognition Depletion (Axis B1–B2).

Low meaning and mattering increase interpretive vulnerability, making political experience more susceptible to moralized blame and binary antagonism.

Factor 3—Political Sacralization (Axis C).

Among far-right populist supporters, political pseudo-sacralization intensifies moral absolutism and identity fusion without indicating intrinsic religiosity.

Factor 4—Agency and Future-Oriented Capability (Axis B4).

Some populist formations combine dissatisfaction with preserved agency and future-oriented capability, producing reform-oriented rather than resentment-driven mobilization.

Factor 5—Materialism.

Together, these factors explain the coexistence of multiple populisms, the psychological—rather than ideological—structure of polarization, and the differentiated electoral trajectories of outsider parties in Japan.

Figure 5 summarizes key psychological factors associated with distinct populist formations in Japan's 2025 political realignment. The figure organizes affective depletion (Axis A), value-based resources and future-oriented capability (Axis B), and political sacralization (Axis C) as a configurational psychological architecture. Different combinations of these factors characterize resentment-based populism, intermediate or ambivalent populism, and reform-oriented populism, highlighting the psychological heterogeneity underlying Japan's contemporary populist landscape.

8.3 Pseudo-religious populism beyond monotheism

Among supporters of Sanseitō and Hoshutō, the data reveal a distinctive pattern of political pseudo-sacralization that should not be interpreted as substantive religious commitment. Rather, it represents a symbolic and moralized sacralization of political identity that emerges under conditions of vulnerability and value depletion.

This profile is characterized by heightened concerns about sanctity and purity, moral absolutism, and a quasi-religious fusion of identity with idealized national or

cultural symbols. Importantly, these dynamics occur in the context of low formal religiosity and outside any monotheistic tradition.

The Japanese case, therefore, extends comparative research on sacralized populism in two crucial respects. First, it demonstrates that sacralized populism does not require an institutional church or a monotheistic religious framework; national-cultural symbols themselves can become sacralized political objects. Second, it shows how affective and existential vulnerability can be transformed into pseudo-religious moralization, allowing far-right formations to convert diffuse frustration into an identity-centered political mission.

In this sense, Japan broadens the comparative scope of research on sacralized populism beyond its usual Western and monotheistic settings, highlighting the psychological—rather than theological—foundations of pseudo-religious political mobilization.

8.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, a cross-sectional design: The data captures a single electoral moment and therefore does not permit strong causal or temporal claims. Although the interpretation of affective depletion (Axis A), erosion of value-based resources (Axis B), and political sacralization (Axis C) as antecedent conditions is theoretically grounded and consistent with international research, causal ordering remains inferential rather than longitudinally or experimentally established.

Second, sample size constraints for some outsider parties: For several far-right and newly emerging parties—most notably Sanseitō and Hoshutō—sample sizes are the modest. This limits statistical power and constrains the estimation of interaction effects or fine-grained subgroup heterogeneity. Accordingly, the typological claims regarding these parties should be understood as pattern-level configurations within the broader psychological architecture.

Third, cultural and institutional specificity: Japan represents a non-Western, relatively secular, yet symbolically dense political context characterized by long-term LDP dominance, coalition politics, and regionally rooted challengers such as Ishin. While the three-axis psychological architecture (Axis A–C) is likely generalizable in structure, its cultural expressions—especially political sacralization—may differ across national and institutional settings. Cross-national replication is therefore required.

Fourth, long-term erosion versus short-term shocks: The analysis spans a period in which long-term declines in well-being interacted with shorter-term shocks (COVID-19, inflation, political scandals, geopolitical anxiety). The present design cannot disentangle their relative contributions; instead, it captures their combined imprint on affective, existential, and value-based conditions.

Fifth, measurement constraints: All psychological indicators rely on self-report measures. Although validated instruments are used, they remain subject to social desirability and context effects. More complex mediational structures suggested by correlations (e.g., Axis A → Axis B → populism) are not fully estimated and remain a task for future research.

These limitations underscore the need for longitudinal, experimental, and comparative designs. At the same time, they do not undermine the central contribution of the Japanese case: It provides one of the clearest non-Western demonstrations that affective well-being, value-based meaning, future-oriented capability, and political sacralization jointly structure populist alignment and electoral outcomes.

8.5 Broader implications for democratic stability

Taken together, the Japanese findings have broader implications for democratic stability. They suggest that democracies are sustained not only by institutional design, but by the affective and existential conditions under which citizens interpret political life.

The analysis points to several general tendencies. When affective well-being collapses (Axis A), citizens become more susceptible to antagonistic and anti-elite narratives. When meaning and mattering erode (Axis B1–B2), emotional discomfort is more readily moralized into resentment and binary political interpretation. In some cases, such resentment is further intensified through political pseudo-sacralization (Axis C), transforming politics into a symbolic and moralized arena. Conversely, when dissatisfaction arises under the conditions of preserved future-oriented capability and agency (Axis B4), it can take the form of reform-oriented rather than resentment-driven populism.

These findings refine structural theories of value change by demonstrating that objective security and long-term modernization are insufficient to account for contemporary populist dynamics unless mediated through subjective well-being, meaning, recognition, and perceived future agency. In this sense, populism appears not merely as a reaction to material or cultural change, but as a political expression of affective-existential fragility.

These implications do not yet constitute a normative prescription, but they establish the diagnostic foundation for the normative reconstruction developed in Chapter “Beyond Populism.” The concept of *Flourishing Democracy* (Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy: EMDD) builds directly on this analysis by asking how democratic systems might be reoriented to support the affective, existential, and value-based conditions identified here as crucial to democratic resilience.

9. Conclusion: Frontier of populism studies in integrative positive political psychology – Using a negative phenomenon to envision positive politics

9.1 Methodological foundation: Toward integrative positive political psychology

This conclusion begins by clarifying the study’s methodological foundations. Rather than interpreting populism through conventional lenses—economic grievance, ideological extremity, or institutional distrust—this research approaches it through the conceptual framework of positive psychology. In doing so, this chapter advances what may be termed Integrative Positive Political Psychology—a framework grounded in the developments of Second Wave (PP2.0) and Third Wave (PP3.0) Positive Psychology.

Second-Wave Positive Psychology (PP2.0) argues that flourishing cannot be understood by isolating positive emotions from negative experiences. Its core proposition is that suffering, adversity, and negative emotional or existential states can constitute essential raw materials for flourishing [30]. Accordingly, negative psychological conditions should be examined not merely as failures, but as diagnostic signals that illuminate the deeper architecture of flourishing. This perspective directly informs the present study, which treats populism as a politically negative phenomenon whose analysis nevertheless reveals underlying affective-existential deficits and thus points toward the conditions of democratic renewal.

Third-Wave Positive Psychology further extends this framework to collective and political well-being, non-Western cultural contexts, and the structural and ecological determinants of flourishing. The proposal of Positive Political Philosophy [3] aligns with this trajectory by explicitly applying positive psychological insights to political and societal domains. In this study, that extension is operationalized through the analysis of collective emotional climates, political meaning-making, relational and communal well-being, and cultural forms of political sacralization. Japan's populist transformation is thus examined as a case of collective democratic well-being rather than as an anomaly of institutional failure.

Building on this theoretical lineage, the present study makes two core contributions. First, as a contribution to political psychology, it applies central constructs of positive psychology—multi-dimensional subjective well-being, meaning and mattering, relational and eudaimonic functioning, and future-oriented capability—to the analysis of political behavior. These variables allow the identification of structural affective-existential conditions that shape susceptibility to populism, factors that are largely invisible in grievance-centered models. Second, as a theoretical contribution, the study advances Integrative Positive Political Psychology by extending PP2.0 to collective political behavior. From this perspective, negative political phenomena—resentment, anti-system anger, anxiety, and sorrow—are interpreted not only as threats but as diagnostic signals of moral-existential erosion within democratic societies.

To clarify this methodological stance, **Figure 7** situates the present study within a dual-integrative framework defined by two orthogonal axes: positive versus negative psychological processes and individual versus collective levels of analysis. Within this quadrantal structure, Integrative Positive Political Psychology emerges as the conceptual bridge that enables the unified analysis of resentment, meaning-making, well-being, and democratic legitimacy developed throughout this book. This dual-integrative framework constitutes the methodological architecture upon which the empirical findings (This chapter) and the normative reconstruction toward what is later conceptualized as Flourishing Democracy are built (Chapter “Beyond Populism”).

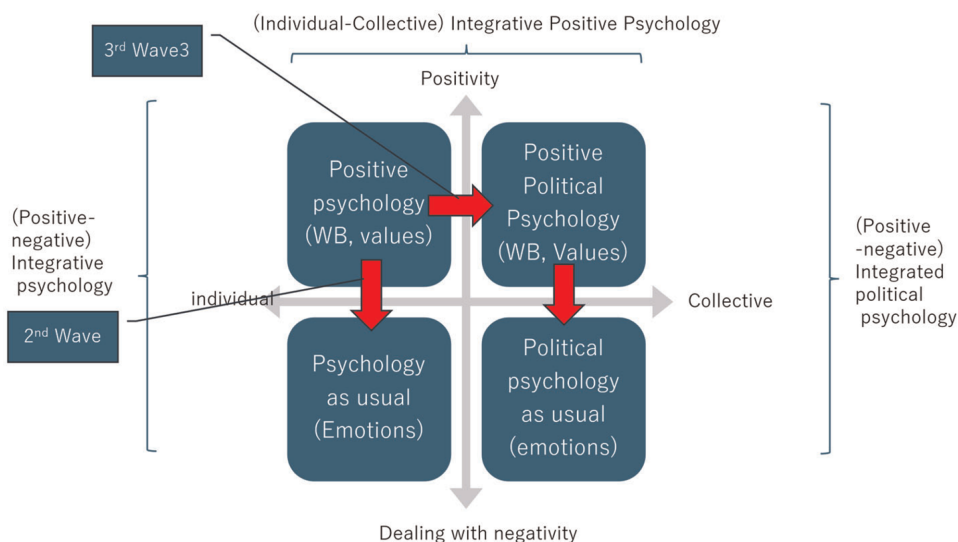


Figure 7.
Dual-integrative positive political psychology framework (positive-negative × individual-collective).

The framework maps political psychological processes across two orthogonal axes: positive versus negative processes and individual versus collective levels of analysis. It illustrates how traditional political psychology (focused on threat and negative affect) and positive psychology (focused on flourishing, meaning, and values) can be integrated within a unified analytical structure.

Within this quadrantal structure, Integrative Positive Political Psychology emerges as a bridging approach in which negative political phenomena—such as resentment, anxiety, anger, and anti-system affect—are treated not merely as threats, but as diagnostic signals of underlying deficits in well-being, meaning, mattering, recognition, and future-oriented capability. At the same time, positive psychological resources—intrinsic meaning, agency, hope, optimism, and relational functioning—specify the conditions under which dissatisfaction is redirected toward constructive and reform-oriented political engagement.

Conceptually, the framework clarifies a consistent structural ordering across Sections 5–8: affective conditions shape susceptibility; meaning and mattering shape interpretation; value orientation and political sacralization shape direction and intensity; and future-oriented capability (agency) shapes political expression. The framework thus provides the methodological architecture underpinning both the empirical analyses (Sections 4–8) and the normative reconstruction toward Flourishing Democracy.

9.2 Political resilience: From individual to collective

Resilience research traditionally focuses on individuals, but this study suggests a parallel concept: collective democratic resilience—a society's capacity to absorb affective shocks, restore WB, meaning, and recognition, and rebuild democracy.

Understanding populism as a *stress signal* provides insight into how democratic systems may cultivate such resilience.

9.2.1 Affective-existential-value architecture

This study operates on an integrative three-layer model—affective, existential, and value-based foundations of judgment—domains where positive psychology offers unique analytic tools.

- Affective layer → emotional strain, sadness-anxiety-anger triads
- Existential layer → meaning, mattering
- Value layer → value orientation, eudaimonic/relational WB, sacralization

Populism emerges where these layers collapse simultaneously.

9.2.2 Normative horizon: Flourishing democracy

The methodological stance adopted here ultimately points toward an expanded normative horizon: Flourishing Democracy—a democratic order that institutionally sustains well-being and intrinsic value-based resources, including meaning, mattering, recognition, dignity, and eudaimonic-relational flourishing, thereby enabling both individual and communal agency.

From this perspective, populism is not merely a political disruption but a societal signal that the affective-existential foundations of democratic life require renewal.

With this integrative framework in place, we now turn to the central empirical proposition demonstrated in this study.

9.3 The central empirical proposition

This study establishes one core empirical proposition:

Multi-dimensional well-being and values depletion → populist attitudes → outsider-party support → electoral transformation.

Across individual psychology, party support composition, and seat change patterns, declines in multi-dimensional well-being and value-based resources were systematically associated with increased support for outsider populist parties. Those same low-resource parties gained seats in the 2025 House of Councillors election. This constitutes one of the clearest demonstrations in a non-Western advanced democracy that subjective and multi-dimensional well-being is structurally linked to contemporary populist realignment.

The causality implied here is structural rather than micro-mechanistic. The claim is not that each component forms a fully specified causal chain, but that depletion of affective well-being and value-based resources constitutes a structurally prior condition for populist alignment and aggregated electoral outcomes. Reverse causal interpretations—such as seat gains producing prior levels of well-being—are implausible given the temporal logic of psychological states and electoral aggregation. More fine-grained mediational processes remain open to future causal testing.

The Japanese case further demonstrates that this structurally prior condition does not yield a single populist outcome. Instead, it is filtered through distinct configurations of value orientations, including meaning, political sacralization, and future-oriented capability. Sections 9.4–9.5, therefore, specifies three psychological pathways through which comparable vulnerability can produce divergent forms of populism.

9.4 Reframing populism through integrative positive political psychology

Building on Section 9.1, the empirical findings call for a reframing of populism within an integrative positive political psychology framework.

A. Populism as a negatively valenced psychological signal rather than a fixed ideological position

Populism does not originate from left-right ideology; it emerges from affective-existential strain. Elevated negative affect, diminished meaning and mattering, weakened eudaimonic functioning, and depleted future-oriented capability constitute negative psychological substrates that precede political expression. In this sense, populism expresses collective suffering before it is articulated in ideological language.

B. Meaning and mattering as interpretive converters of affect

Negative affect alone rarely produces political extremity. The Japanese 2025 data show that meaning and mattering are tightly associated with both well-being and populist attitudes, indicating an interpretive conversion mechanism: Affective strain becomes politically consequential when existential resources

erode. Under such conditions, dissatisfaction is more likely to be expressed through moralized blame, elite-people dichotomies, simplified narratives of decline, and receptivity to sacralized rhetoric.

C. Value orientation and political sacralization as directional modifiers

Value-related orientations differentiate how comparable strain is channeled. Intrinsic and eudaimonic orientations tend to moderate the conversion of negative affect into hostile populism, whereas materialist orientations align more closely with grievance-driven pathways under depletion. Political sacralization (Axis C) operates as a distinct intensifier, converting frustration into pseudo-sacred moralization and identity fusion rather than reflecting intrinsic spirituality or ethical depth.

These interpretations extend the observed associations theoretically. While they do not claim demonstrated mediation, they support a coherent directional reading: value orientation, sacralization, and future-oriented capability shape whether discontent is expressed as resentment, sacralized identity, or constructive reform.

9.5 Three psychological pathways reinterpreted through the integrative framework

Building on sections 5–8, the three pathways of Japanese populism can be reinterpreted within a unified psychological architecture defined by Axes A (affective well-being), B (value-based resources and future-oriented capability), and C (political sacralization).

In line with Positive Psychology 2.0, negative and positive processes are not opposites but dynamically interacting dimensions of psychological regulation.

1. *Resentment-Based Populism (Type 1A/1B): Negative → Negative*

This pathway is characterized by low Axis A and low Axis B: affective depletion combined with erosion of meaning and mattering and depleted future-oriented capability. In Type 1B, the same vulnerability is exacerbated by high Axis C, resulting in pseudo-sacred moralization and identity fusion. Interpreted within the integrative framework, this constitutes a negative-to-negative trajectory in which suffering is converted into resentment and antagonistic political expression.

2. *Mixed-Motivation Populism (Type 2): Negative → Ambivalent*

DPFP occupies an intermediate configuration across axes, combining moderate affective depletion with partial value-based resources and low sacralization. Psychologically, this corresponds to a zone in which vulnerability is present but not fully moralized, and agency exists but is insufficiently consolidated to support a stable reform trajectory. The result is an ambivalent pathway marked by volatility rather than intensified resentment.

3. *Reform-Oriented Populism (Type 3): Positive Resources → Libertarian Reform Orientation*

A distinctive pathway, most clearly observed among Ishin supporters, combines high affective well-being and strong value-based resources—especially future-

oriented capability—with low sacralization. Here, dissatisfaction is generated not by deprivation but by capability and aspiration: the belief that improvement is both possible and achievable. Psychologically, positive resources are mobilized toward reform orientation rather than resentment or identity antagonism.

Across pathways, negatively valenced affect (anger, anxiety, sadness) is widely present; however, its political meaning depends on the surrounding existential and value-based layers. Meaning and mattering function as interpretive switches; value orientation and political sacralization redirect or amplify expression; and future-oriented capability differentiates resentment from reform. These pathways should therefore be understood as the interpretive trajectories structured by the interaction between negatively valenced affect and positive psychological resources, rather than as fixed causal sequences.

The trajectories may be schematically summarized as follows:

1. Negatively valenced affect → Reinforced negativity (resentment-based populism),
2. Negatively valenced affect → Ambivalent redirection,
3. Positive psychological resources → Reform-oriented mobilization.

9.6 Populism as a multi-level phenomenon: Integrating individual and collective political psychology

Taken together, the findings indicate that populism is neither reducible to individual psychological dispositions nor explainable solely by institutions or ideology. Rather, it emerges as a multi-level process in which affective and existential experiences are translated into political meaning across individual, group, and societal contexts. This perspective aligns with Third-Wave Positive Psychology, which extends the study of well-being from individuals to collective and institutional environments, and contributes to integrative positive political psychology.

- A. *Individual level*: When affective strain co-occurs with depleted meaning and mattering and weak future-oriented capability, dissatisfaction is more likely to be interpreted through resentment-based and antagonistic frames. By contrast, when meaning and future-oriented capability are preserved, dissatisfaction tends to manifest as reform-oriented and constructive political engagement.
- B. *Group level*: Political parties function as collective meaning-making environments that selectively attract and reinforce distinct affective-existential profiles. Resentment-based populist parties cluster psychologically vulnerable supporters, reform-oriented parties attract higher-agency profiles, and sacralized far-right formations further intensify identity fusion and moral absolutism.
- C. *Societal level*: At the macro-level, populism operates as a psychological indicator of democratic fragility. Its rise signals systemic failures to sustain meaning, recognition, dignity, and relational belonging. In this sense, populism is both a disruptive force and a diagnostic marker, pointing to the direction democratic renewal must take.

9.7 Populism in a dual-integration framework: Ideology as carrier, not cause

As summarized in **Figure 8**, this study integrates positive and negative psychological processes with individual and collective levels of analysis into a unified explanatory framework. Across sections 5–8, the findings support a consistent structural ordering: affective conditions shape susceptibility; meaning and mattering shape interpretation; value orientation and political sacralization shape direction and intensity; and future-oriented capability (agency) shapes political expression.

Within this framework, ideology functions primarily as a narrative carrier rather than a causal origin. It provides linguistic form to deeper affective-existential dynamics. This helps explain why ideologically divergent formations can exhibit structurally similar psychological profiles. In short, ideology explains how populism speaks; psychology explains why it resonates.

9.8 Reversing the causal chain: Toward a model of flourishing democracy

The negative political pathway identified in this study can be summarized as:

Axis A/B depletion → resentment → populism → democratic fragility.

A natural expectation is that recovery of national well-being would reverse this chain. Yet Japan's persistent stagnation in subjective well-being suggests that waiting for recovery alone is unlikely to resolve the structural psychological roots of populist susceptibility. This raises a practical question: *what can democratic societies do when recovery is slow, uneven, or uncertain?*

Here, positive psychology, especially resilience research, becomes relevant. PP2.0 suggests that meaning and constructive motivation can be regenerated under

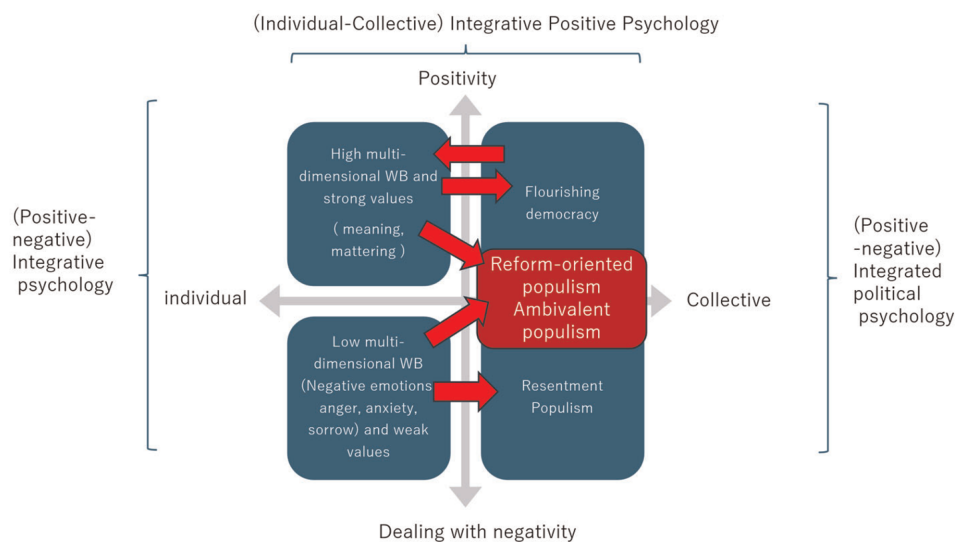


Figure 8. Populism in a dual-integration framework (positive-negative × individual-collective). The figure applies the dual-integration framework to the three Japanese populist pathways, illustrating how combinations of affective conditions, meaning and mattering, value orientation, political sacralization, and future-oriented capability generate resentment-based, ambivalent, and reform-oriented forms of populism.

adversity when appropriate psychological and institutional support is in place. Democratic renewal can therefore begin before aggregate well-being fully improves.

Within this framework, pathways to resilience can be developed across three levels:

1. Micro (individual): emotional and value resilience

Interventions can strengthen emotion regulation, meaning-centered coping, sense of mattering, and community-based support that restore dignity and belonging. These do not replace structural reform but can reduce susceptibility to resentment narratives.

2. Meso (institutions/policy): restoring recognition, fairness, and agency

Because meaning and mattering deficits are central drivers, democratic renewal requires institutional strategies to restore recognition, justice, and fairness; participation and empowerment; and inclusive belonging.

3. Macro (normative): Flourishing Democracy

At the societal level, populism signals a failure to sustain multi-dimensional well-being and values. Reversing this requires a normative reconstruction of democracy—*Flourishing Democracy*.

From this perspective, well-being and value-based resources are not merely private outcomes or policy by-products, but constitutional public goods: foundational conditions that democratic systems must actively sustain in order to remain legitimate, resilient, and future-oriented.

Thus, democratic renewal need not wait for spontaneous recovery. Through coordinated micro-, meso-, and macro-level strategies—culminating in *Flourishing Democracy*—societies can transform the negative signal of populism into pathways for psycho-political regeneration. From this perspective, populism functions as a *stress signal* of democratic systems' capacity—or incapacity—to sustain collective meaning, recognition, and future-oriented agency.

However, this chapter has confined itself to diagnosing the affective-existential architecture underlying Japan's populist realignment. While these findings carry clear normative implications for democratic resilience, the systematic reconstruction of democracy as a meaning-generating and well-being-sustaining order is reserved for the final chapter, "Beyond Populism."

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Supplementary materials

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Author details

Masaya Kobayashi^{1*}, Hikari Ishido² and Jiro Mizushima¹

1 Graduate School of Social Sciences, Chiba University, Japan

2 Graduate School of Global and Transdisciplinary Studies, Chiba University, Japan

*Address all correspondence to: masaya_kobayashi@nifty.com

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Chapter 3

Populism in Post-Reform Democracy: Challenges and Political Dynamics in Indonesia

Isnaini Muallidin and Heroe Waskito

Abstract

This chapter examines the complex character of Indonesian populism in the post-Suharto democratic era, characterized by the coexistence of democratic institutions with authoritarian legacies. Indonesian populism differs substantially from Western and Latin American variants, emerging at the intersection of religious identity politics, nationalism, and economic grievances. Through analysis of key political figures like Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto, alongside grassroots movements such as the 212 Movement, this chapter identifies four distinct populist typologies in Indonesia: technocratic-nationalist, confrontational-nationalist, technocratic-religious, and confrontational-religious. The analysis reveals a fundamental tension within Indonesian democracy. While populist mobilization has enhanced political participation among previously marginalized groups, it has simultaneously weakened institutional checks and balances, particularly judicial independence and media freedom. This chapter contributes to understanding the paradoxical role of populism in non-Western democracies and offers insights into Indonesia's democratic trajectory.

Keywords: populism, post-reform, democracy, political dynamic, Indonesia

1. Introduction

The global resurgence of populism has transformed political landscapes across established and emerging democracies. As a political phenomenon, populism presents a paradoxical challenge: it simultaneously claims to empower ordinary citizens while potentially undermining democratic institutions through its anti-pluralist tendencies. In Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest democracy, populism has emerged as a significant political force in the post-reformation era following the fall of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime in 1998. The democratic transition that ensued created fertile ground for populist politics to flourish amidst economic inequality, persistent corruption, and growing public disillusionment with traditional political elites.

This chapter examines the distinct character of Indonesian populism within the broader context of the country's democratic development. Indonesia presents a compelling case study of how populism operates within a young democracy still navigating the

complex legacies of authoritarianism. The Indonesian experience reveals how populist appeals can both strengthen democratic participation by mobilizing marginalized groups and simultaneously threaten democratic consolidation by weakening institutional checks and balances. Particularly significant is how Indonesian populism manifests through a unique interplay of religious, nationalist, and economic dimensions that distinguishes it from Western and Latin American variants.

The central questions driving this analysis are: How has populism evolved in Indonesia's post-reform political landscape? What governance mechanisms characterize populist leadership in Indonesia? Which political figures and parties can be categorized as "populist" according to established theoretical frameworks? And critically, does Indonesia's current president embody populist tendencies? Through addressing these questions, this chapter contributes to the theoretical understanding of populism in non-Western democracies and provides empirical insights into Indonesia's political development.

This investigation is particularly timely as Indonesia commemorates more than two decades of democratic rule while confronting challenges to its democratic consolidation. The analysis draws upon comparative political theory, Indonesian political history, and contemporary governance studies to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding the causes, manifestations, and consequences of populism in Indonesia's evolving democracy.

2. Understanding populism in the Indonesian context

2.1 Defining populism: Theoretical dimensions

The conceptual terrain of populism remains contested among scholars, with significant debate surrounding its definition, characteristics, and implications. At its core, populism entails a political discourse that constructs politics as a moral struggle between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" [1, 2]. This ideational approach defines populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that can attach itself to fuller ideological traditions spanning both left and right political spectrums. Laclau approaches populism as a discursive logic involving the construction of a political frontier dividing society into two antagonistic camps [3]. Meanwhile, political-strategic approaches conceptualize populism as a political strategy through which personalistic leaders seek or exercise government power based on direct, unmediated support from largely unorganized followers [4].

A synthetic approach incorporating elements from these theoretical perspectives for Indonesia proves most useful. Indonesian populism manifests as a combination of ideational elements (anti-elite rhetoric and claims to represent the authentic "people"), stylistic dimensions (direct communication strategies and charismatic leadership), and strategic components (mobilization of mass support against established political institutions). What distinguishes Indonesian populism, however, is how these common elements intertwine with the country's specific historical, cultural, and religious contexts.

2.2 Indonesian exceptionalism: Cultural and historical contingencies

Indonesian populism bears distinctive characteristics shaped by the nation's unique historical trajectory and cultural milieu. Unlike Latin American populism,

which often emerges in response to economic crises and inequality, or European populism, which frequently mobilizes against immigration and globalization, Indonesian populism operates within a post-authoritarian context where democratic institutions remain fragile. The legacy of Sukarno's guided democracy (1959–1965) and Suharto's centralized New Order regime (1966–1998) continues to influence how political authority is conceived and legitimized.

The cultural concept of “power” in Javanese political tradition, where power is seen as concrete, homogeneous, constant in total quantity, and without inherent moral implications [5], creates a distinctive foundation for how populist appeals operate in Indonesia. This cultural understanding of power contributes to the personalistic nature of Indonesian politics, where charismatic individuals often eclipse institutions. Additionally, Indonesia's religious landscape, particularly its position as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, infuses its populism with religious symbolism and appeals that differentiate it from secular populist movements elsewhere.

2.3 Democracy and populism in post-reformation Indonesia

The fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 inaugurated Indonesia's democratic reformation (reformasi) era, characterized by rapid decentralization, the proliferation of political parties, and expanded civil liberties. This democratic opening created both opportunities and challenges for populist politics. On one hand, democratization expanded the political space for previously marginalized voices and heightened expectations for more responsive governance. On the other hand, the persistence of oligarchic structures within the new democratic framework [6] generated disillusionment that populist figures could exploit.

Mietzner identifies three waves of populism in post-reformation Indonesia: an initial technocratic populism during the early transition years, a confrontational populism that emerged in response to perceived elite capture of democratic institutions, and a more mature populism that combines anti-elite rhetoric with pragmatic governance [7]. This evolutionary perspective helps explain how populism has adapted to Indonesia's changing democratic landscape while maintaining its core appeal as an antidote to elite domination.

This conceptual framework provides the analytical tools for examining how populism manifests in Indonesia's distinctive political context, shapes governance mechanisms, and operates within the country's democratic institutions. The framework acknowledges both the universal elements of populism as a global phenomenon and the particular characteristics that make Indonesian populism unique.

3. Historical evolution of populism in Indonesia's political landscape

3.1 Pre-independence roots: Colonial resistance, nationalist movements

The genealogy of Indonesian populism traces back to the anti-colonial movements of the early twentieth century, where figures like Sukarno skillfully mobilized mass support against Dutch colonial rule by articulating a vision of Indonesian identity that transcended ethnic and religious divisions. Sukarno's ability to synthesize nationalism, religion, and socialism (Nasakom) into a coherent ideological framework represented an early manifestation of populist coalition-building [8]. His charismatic leadership style and direct appeals to the rakyat (common people) established a

template for future Indonesian populists who would similarly position themselves as the authentic voice of the people against foreign and domestic elites.

The Japanese occupation (1942–1945) further shaped Indonesia's populist tradition by providing opportunities for nationalist leaders to mobilize mass organizations while developing anti-Western rhetoric that would later inform Indonesian political discourse. This historical experience embedded anti-imperialism as a recurring theme in Indonesian populist appeals, distinguishing it from populist movements in countries without colonial legacies.

3.2 Sukarno's guided democracy: Populism in the postcolonial era

After independence, Sukarno's transition from constitutional democracy to "Guided Democracy" (1959–1965) represented Indonesia's first sustained experience with populist governance. Frustrated by parliamentary deadlock and regional rebellions, Sukarno established a more centralized political system that emphasized national unity over liberal democratic procedures. His famous MANIPOL-USDEK doctrine (Political Manifesto—Five Principles) outlined a distinctly Indonesian path to development that rejected Western liberal democracy as incompatible with Indonesian values [9].

Sukarno's populism featured several characteristics that would recur in later Indonesian populist movements: charismatic leadership, anti-Western rhetoric, appeals to indigenous values, and the subordination of procedural democracy to substantive goals of social justice and national unity. However, his regime's economic mismanagement and growing authoritarianism ultimately undermined his populist credentials, leading to the political crisis that facilitated Suharto's rise to power.

3.3 The New Order era: Suppression of populist politics

Suharto's New Order regime (1966–1998) systematically suppressed genuine populist mobilization while paradoxically appropriating populist rhetoric to legitimize authoritarian rule. The regime's development ideology emphasized economic growth and political stability over democratic participation, effectively depoliticizing Indonesian society through a combination of coercion and cooption. Suharto's concept of "floating mass" deliberately disconnected citizens from political processes except during carefully controlled elections [10].

Despite this suppression, latent populist sentiment persisted in Islamic organizations, student movements, and labor activism. These forces eventually converged in the reformasi movement that toppled Suharto amid the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis. The economic devastation and perceived corruption of the Suharto family created conditions for populist mobilization against an entrenched elite that had lost legitimacy, establishing a pattern that would repeat in subsequent political transitions.

3.4 Reformation era: Democratic opening and populist opportunities

The fall of Suharto in 1998 unleashed pent-up populist energies as Indonesia embarked on democratic reforms. The presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) represented an early attempt at inclusive populism that sought to reconcile Indonesia's diverse communities through pluralist rhetoric. As a respected Islamic scholar and champion of minority rights, Wahid appealed directly to ordinary

citizens while challenging entrenched military and bureaucratic elites [11]. However, his administration's disorganization and conflicts with parliament led to his impeachment, demonstrating the challenges of translating populist appeals into effective governance.

Megawati Sukarnoputri's presidency (2001–2004) leveraged her lineage as Sukarno's daughter to establish populist credentials, particularly among lower-income Indonesians who remembered her father's championing of the "little people" (*wong cilik*). However, her technocratic governance style and limited public engagement prevented her from fully capitalizing on this populist potential. The Megawati era illustrates how dynastic connections to earlier populist figures can provide symbolic resources for populist mobilization, even when not accompanied by substantive populist policies [12].

3.5 The rise of Islamic populism and technocratic populism

Since 2004, Indonesian populism has diversified into distinct variants that reflect the country's evolving political landscape. The 2008–2009 global financial crisis, though less devastating to Indonesia than the 1997–1998 crisis, nonetheless reinforced populist critiques of neoliberal economic policies and fueled demands for greater economic nationalism. This period saw the emergence of two significant populist strands that would shape subsequent Indonesian politics.

First, Islamic populism gained prominence through figures like Rizieq Shihab, leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), who mobilized conservative Muslims against perceived moral corruption and foreign cultural influence. The massive 2016–2017 protests against Jakarta's Christian Chinese governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), demonstrated the mobilizing potential of religious populism when combined with ethnic grievances [13]. This movement positioned pious Muslims as the authentic "people" against a secular elite allegedly captured by foreign and non-Muslim interests.

Second, technocratic populism emerged through figures like Joko Widodo (Jokowi), who combined humble origins and direct communication with common people with promises of effective, nonideological governance. Jokowi's meteoric rise from furniture businessman to mayor of Solo, governor of Jakarta, and eventually president represented a new model of Indonesian populism based on performance legitimacy rather than revolutionary rhetoric [7].

These historical developments reveal how Indonesian populism has continuously adapted to changing political contexts while maintaining certain core characteristics: personalistic leadership, anti-elite rhetoric, claims to embody the authentic "voice of the people," and the strategic use of religious and nationalist symbolism. This historical evolution provides essential context for understanding contemporary populist governance mechanisms in Indonesia.

4. Governance mechanisms and political dynamics of Indonesian populism

4.1 How populists operate within Indonesia's democratic framework

Indonesian populists have developed distinctive strategies for navigating the country's democratic institutions while maintaining their anti-establishment credentials.

Unlike populists in some Latin American or Eastern European contexts who openly attack constitutional constraints, Indonesian populists typically work within formal institutional parameters while informally circumventing obstacles to their agendas. This approach reflects both Indonesia's strong constitutional tradition and the lingering public trauma from authoritarian rule.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) exemplified a moderate technocratic populism that balanced democratic procedures with personalistic appeals. His direct cash transfer programs bypassed bureaucratic intermediaries to establish direct relationships with recipients, while his extensive use of polling and focus groups allowed him to align policies with popular sentiment [14]. This “populism lite” established governance patterns that would be intensified by his successor.

Joko Widodo's presidency (2014–2024) has further developed these governance mechanisms through strategies like *blusukan* (impromptu visits to ordinary communities) that symbolically bypass official channels of communication. Jokowi has also centralized decision-making power within the executive branch while maintaining democratic formalities, for instance, by expanding the presidential staff (KSP) rather than formally challenging parliamentary authority [15]. His infrastructure focus similarly establishes direct visibility between presidential leadership and tangible benefits for citizens.

4.2 Coalition management: Balancing populist rhetoric with elite accommodation

A distinctive feature of Indonesian populism is the pragmatic alliance-building required by the country's fragmented party system. Unlike populists in majoritarian systems who can rely on clear electoral mandates, Indonesian populists must construct and maintain broad coalitions that inevitably include elements of the political establishment they rhetorically oppose. This necessity creates tensions between populist messaging and governance reality.

Prabowo Subianto's 2019 presidential campaign illustrates this tension. Despite fiery rhetoric condemning the “theft” of Indonesia's wealth by foreign interests and corrupt elites, Prabowo allied with established Islamic parties and oligarchic figures whose interests contradicted his economic nationalist platform [16]. This contradiction between populist rhetoric and elite accommodation reflects the structural constraints within Indonesia's political system that force even the most ardent populists into pragmatic compromises.

Jokowi's cabinet appointments similarly demonstrate this balancing act. His inclusion of technocrats, party figures, and military officers alongside progressive civil society representatives in his cabinets represents a pragmatic accommodation of diverse elite interests that contrasts with his man-of-the-people image. This coalition management approach helps explain why Indonesian populism rarely translates into radical policy shifts despite sometimes revolutionary rhetoric.

4.3 Communication strategies: Bypassing traditional media and elite intermediaries

Indonesian populists have developed distinctive communication strategies that establish direct connections with supporters while circumventing traditional media gatekeepers. Social media platforms have proven particularly valuable for this purpose, allowing populist figures to present unfiltered messages and cultivate personal

connections with followers. The rapid expansion of internet access in Indonesia, with over 170 million users by 2020, has transformed how political communication operates.

Anies Baswedan's successful 2017 gubernatorial campaign in Jakarta demonstrated the power of combining traditional religious networks with sophisticated digital communication strategies. His team effectively utilized WhatsApp groups and targeted social media content to mobilize conservative Muslim voters while bypassing mainstream media outlets perceived as hostile to his candidacy [17]. Similarly, populist Islamic figures like Felix Siauw have built massive social media followings that allow them to shape public discourse without institutional positions.

These communication strategies enable Indonesian populists to maintain an outsider identity despite holding formal power. By presenting themselves as directly connected to ordinary citizens rather than embedded in elite networks, populist leaders can sustain their anti-establishment credentials even while occupying the highest offices of state.

4.4 Policy implementation: Economic nationalism and welfare populism

In policy terms, Indonesian populism typically manifests through economic nationalism and direct welfare programs that establish visible links between the leader and citizens. Economic nationalism appeals to historical anti-colonial sentiment while addressing genuine concerns about foreign dominance in strategic sectors. Jokowi's resource nationalism—including the government takeover of the Grasberg mine from Freeport McMoran and the nationalization of the Rokan oil block from Chevron—exemplifies how populist leaders leverage nationalist economic policies to demonstrate sovereignty [18].

Social welfare programs with direct distribution mechanisms represent another characteristic policy tool of Indonesian populists. The expansion of conditional cash transfers (Program Keluarga Harapan), subsidized health insurance (Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial (BPJS) Kesehatan), and education assistance (Kartu Indonesia Pintar) under Jokowi illustrates how populist governance establishes direct relationships between the president and beneficiaries. These programs are deliberately branded as presidential initiatives rather than impersonal bureaucratic processes, reinforcing the personal connection between the leader and citizens that sustains populist legitimacy.

Infrastructure development serves a similar function by creating visible evidence of government action that improves ordinary lives. Jokowi's emphasis on infrastructure projects—from highways and ports to the Jakarta—provides tangible symbols of progress that bypass the complex policy discussions typical of technocratic governance [19]. This preference for visible, attributable policies over structural reforms characterizes populist governance across ideological variants.

4.5 Religious symbolism and identity politics in governance

Religious symbolism plays a distinctive role in Indonesian populist governance, reflecting the country's status as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy. Populist leaders strategically deploy religious credentials and symbols to establish moral authority and authenticate their connection to the ummah (Muslim community). This dynamic has intensified since the 2016–2017 Islamist mobilizations against Ahok, which demonstrated the electoral potential of religious identity politics.

Jokowi's selection of conservative cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his 2019 vice-presidential candidate exemplifies the strategic accommodation of religious symbolism within ostensibly technocratic governance. Similarly, his increased public displays of piety during his second term, including more frequent mosque visits and Islamic references in speeches, represent efforts to neutralize religious opposition by appropriating its symbols [20].

More explicitly Islamist populists like Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) politicians and FPI leaders position themselves as defenders of Muslim interests against secular elites allegedly captured by foreign and non-Muslim influences. Their governance vision emphasizes moral regulation and religious values as solutions to corruption and social problems. The 2019 Omnibus Criminal Code debates illustrated how religious populists can mobilize moral concerns into political capital, forcing even secular politicians to accommodate conservative religious perspectives in legislation.

These governance mechanisms reveal how Indonesian populism operates through a complex interplay of institutional navigation, coalition management, communication strategies, policy implementation, and identity politics. The following section examines which specific political leaders and parties can be categorized as populist according to theoretical frameworks.

5. Identifying populist actors in Indonesia's political landscape

5.1 Theoretical typology: Categories of Indonesian populism

To systematically identify populist actors in Indonesia's political landscape, this section develops a typology based on two key dimensions: ideological orientation (secular-nationalist versus religious-conservative) and governance approach (technocratic versus confrontational). This framework produces four ideal types of Indonesian populism:

1. *Technocratic-nationalist populism*: Emphasizes practical problem-solving and economic development while appealing to national unity and sovereignty. Leaders claim to represent ordinary citizens against inefficient bureaucracies and corrupt elites through pragmatic, results-oriented governance.
2. *Confrontational-nationalist populism*: Adopts more aggressive rhetoric against domestic and foreign elites, emphasizing economic nationalism and sovereignty. Leaders position themselves as defenders of national interests against exploitative foreign powers and their domestic collaborators.
3. *Technocratic-religious populism*: Combines religious legitimacy with promises of effective governance and moral leadership. Leaders present themselves as pious administrators who can purify government while delivering practical benefits.
4. *Confrontational-religious populism*: Mobilizes religious identity against secular elites and religious minorities, framing politics as a moral struggle between believers and corrupt secularists. Leaders position themselves as defenders of religious values against immoral or foreign-influenced opponents.

This typology provides analytical clarity while acknowledging that actual political actors often combine elements from multiple categories or shift between them strategically.

5.2 Presidential populists: Assessing Indonesia's national leadership

Indonesia's post-reformation presidents have exhibited varying degrees of populist tendencies, with some more clearly fitting populist criteria than others. Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) embodied elements of technocratic-religious populism through his combination of Islamic credentials and anti-establishment positioning. As former chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, Wahid possessed religious legitimacy while maintaining progressive values that challenged conservative orthodoxies. His efforts to dismantle military influence in politics and empower civil society represented populist challenges to entrenched elites, though his governance was ultimately constrained by institutional resistance [11].

Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004) leveraged her father's populist legacy while governing as a moderate technocrat. Her symbolic connection to Sukarno provided populist credentials, particularly among secular nationalists and lower-income Indonesians. However, her administration's embrace of IMF-recommended economic policies and limited public engagement prevented her from developing a distinctive populist governance style [21].

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) practiced a cautious technocratic-nationalist populism characterized by direct welfare programs and careful public communication. His "populism lite" established personal connections with citizens through programs like direct cash assistance while maintaining orthodox economic policies and democratic procedures. Yudhoyono's popularity stemmed partly from his ability to project both common-man authenticity and presidential dignity, though critics noted his reluctance to confront entrenched interests [14].

Joko Widodo (2014–2024) represents Indonesia's clearest example of technocratic-nationalist populism, combining humble origins and man-of-the-people authenticity with pragmatic governance. His blusukan approach of impromptu visits to ordinary communities, preference for informal attire, and background outside the traditional political elite established his populist credentials. Jokowi's governance style emphasizes direct connections with citizens, visible infrastructure development, and economic nationalism, particularly in natural resource management [7, 15].

Whether Jokowi qualifies as "populist" has generated scholarly debate. Some argue his inclusive rhetoric, coalition-building, and institutional respect disqualify him from the populist category [22]. Others contend that his anti-elite positioning, personalistic leadership, and claims to embody ordinary Indonesians' aspirations meet core populist criteria despite his moderate governance approach [15]. This analytical disagreement reflects broader debates about defining populism, whether it requires explicit anti-pluralism or merely anti-elitism combined with people-centrism.

5.3 Parliamentary populists: Parties and legislative leaders

Within Indonesia's party system, several organizations demonstrate populist characteristics to varying degrees. Gerindra (Great Indonesia Movement Party) under Prabowo Subianto exemplifies confrontational-nationalist populism through its economic nationalism, anti-corruption rhetoric, and charismatic leadership. Prabowo's campaigns have consistently employed populist framing, positioning him as a strong leader who will defend Indonesian sovereignty against foreign exploitation and restore dignity to struggling citizens [21]. His 2019 campaign slogan, "Make Indonesia Great Again," explicitly echoed Trumpian populist messaging.

PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) represents technocratic-religious populism through its combination of Islamist ideology and clean governance messaging. As Indonesia's most institutionalized Islamist party, PKS has positioned itself as a moral alternative to corrupt secular parties while emphasizing its technocratic competence in local governance. The party's anti-corruption stance and grassroots mobilization embody populist challenges to established political practices, though its integration into normal coalition politics has moderated its anti-system tendencies [23].

The Democrat Party (Partai Demokrat) under Yudhoyono practiced centrist populism that emphasized leadership personality over ideological clarity. The party's dependence on Yudhoyono's popularity rather than programmatic differentiation exemplifies personalistic populism's organizational manifestation. However, the party's embrace of political insiders and establishment figures limited its anti-elite credibility despite populist campaign messaging [24].

At the local level, various regional leaders have employed populist strategies tailored to local contexts. Tri Rismaharini (Surabaya), Ridwan Kamil (Bandung/West Java), and Anies Baswedan (Jakarta) have all combined personalistic leadership with claims to represent ordinary citizens against entrenched bureaucratic or economic interests. Their diverse approaches, from Risma's hands-on technocratic populism to Anies's religious-inflected community empowerment rhetoric, demonstrate how populism adapts to different Indonesian political environments.

5.4 Religious populists: Nonparty actors and social movements

Outside formal party structures, religious organizations and movements have emerged as significant populist actors in Indonesia's democratic landscape.

The 212 Movement that emerged from the 2016–2017 anti-Ahok protests represents confrontational-religious populism through its mobilization of Muslim identity against perceived threats from secular elites and religious minorities. Leaders like Rizieq Shihab constructed a narrative positioning “native” (pribumi) Muslims as the authentic Indonesian people threatened by Chinese Christian economic power and secular political elites [13]. This movement's ability to mobilize hundreds of thousands of protestors demonstrated the potent combination of religious identity, economic grievances, and anti-elite sentiment in Indonesian populism.

Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front) under Rizieq's leadership similarly embodied confrontational-religious populism through street demonstrations, moral vigilantism, and challenges to state authority on religious grounds. FPI's positioning as defenders of ordinary Muslims against morally corrupt elites and its use of religious symbolism to legitimize political actions represent classic populist strategies adapted to Indonesia's religious context [25].

The Tarbiyah Movement and other campus-based Islamic organizations have practiced more institutional forms of religious populism, working through student organizations and social service networks to promote Islamic values as alternatives to corrupt secular governance. Their emphasis on moral purification of politics through religious principles represents a distinctive form of Indonesian populism that bridges religious revivalism and political reform [26].

This mapping of Indonesia's populist landscape reveals the diversity of populist expressions across institutional positions, ideological orientations, and governance approaches. The final sections of this chapter examine the implications of these populist tendencies for Indonesia's democratic development and future political trajectory.

6. Case studies: Populist leadership and governance in action

6.1 Joko Widodo: The evolution of technocratic populism

Joko Widodo's political trajectory offers a revealing case study in how populist leadership evolves when confronting institutional constraints and elite resistance. Jokowi's transformation from Solo mayor to national leader illustrates both the power and limitations of technocratic populism in Indonesia's democratic system.

As mayor of Solo (2005–2012), Jokowi developed a distinctive governance approach combining direct public engagement, pragmatic problem-solving, and symbolic gestures of equality. His relocation of street vendors through dialog rather than force established his reputation as a leader who respected ordinary citizens while achieving practical results. His willingness to meet directly with constituents in their environments through *blusukan* visits circumvented bureaucratic filters and established personal connections with voters [7].

As Jakarta governor (2012–2014), Jokowi retained these populist communication strategies while implementing more ambitious policy reforms. His healthcare card and educational assistance programs established direct relationships between his administration and beneficiaries, bypassing traditional patronage networks. However, growing elite opposition to his reforms, particularly from entrenched interests in the provincial legislature, revealed the limitations of populist approaches when confronting organized institutional resistance [27].

Jokowi's presidential governance (2014–2024) demonstrates how Indonesian populism adapts to national leadership constraints. During his first term, Jokowi emphasized infrastructure development, administrative reform, and economic nationalism. His decision to eliminate most fuel subsidies early in his presidency, despite their popularity among lower-income voters, showed a willingness to prioritize fiscal sustainability over short-term populist benefits. However, he recast this technocratic decision in populist terms by redirecting savings toward village funds and social programs that established more direct connections between the presidency and citizens [18].

Jokowi's second term has revealed both continuity and evolution in his populist governance. His response to the COVID-19 pandemic initially emphasized technocratic public health measures but gradually incorporated more personalistic elements, including his highly publicized willingness to be the first Indonesian to receive the Chinese-developed Sinovac vaccine. His growing comfort with power has manifested in more assertive executive action, including the controversial Omnibus Law on Job Creation that centralized economic policymaking authority while weakening environmental protections and labor rights [15].

This case study reveals how Indonesian technocratic populism operates as a governance strategy: combining direct engagement with ordinary citizens, visible policy initiatives that establish presidential attribution, strategic deployment of nationalist rhetoric, and pragmatic accommodation of elite interests. Jokowi's case demonstrates both the appeal of this approach for voters seeking authentic representation and its limitations in achieving structural reforms against entrenched interests.

6.2 Prabowo Subianto: Confrontational populism and electoral mobilization

Prabowo Subianto's political career offers a contrasting case study in confrontational populism's electoral potential and governance limitations. As Suharto's former

son-in-law and a retired military general implicated in human rights abuses, Prabowo represents an unusual populist figure—an elite insider positioning himself as an anti-establishment outsider.

Prabowo's 2014 and 2019 presidential campaigns employed classic populist rhetoric, positioning him as a strong leader who would defend Indonesia against foreign exploitation and corrupt elites. His campaign speeches frequently invoked threats to national sovereignty, including claims that Indonesia would "cease to exist" by 2030 without decisive leadership. His economic platform emphasized resource nationalism, self-sufficiency, and protection against foreign economic domination [21].

What makes Prabowo's case particularly instructive is how his confrontational populism gained electoral traction despite his elite background. His strategic coalition-building with Islamic parties and conservative religious organizations transformed his image from secular nationalist to defender of Muslim interests. The 2019 campaign's informal "2019 Change President" (#2019GantiPresiden) movement demonstrated how social media could amplify confrontational populist messaging outside official campaign structures [17].

Prabowo's surprising decision to join Jokowi's cabinet as defense minister after his 2019 electoral defeat reveals the pragmatic flexibility beneath his confrontational rhetoric. This alliance between former populist rivals illustrates how Indonesian populism frequently accommodates elite interests despite anti-elite messaging. Prabowo's acceptance of a cabinet position and subsequent moderation of his rhetoric demonstrate how institutional incorporation can neutralize confrontational populism's anti-system potential.

This case study highlights several distinctive features of Indonesian confrontational populism: its tactical use of religious networks despite secular leadership backgrounds, its combination of economic nationalism with conservative values, and its ultimate willingness to compromise with establishment forces despite revolutionary rhetoric.

6.3 The 212 Movement and Islamic populism: Religion as populist mobilization

The 2016–2017 mobilizations against Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) provide a crucial case study in religious populism's potential to reshape Indonesia's political landscape. These protests—named for their December 2, 2016, peak demonstration—represented the largest religious mobilization in Indonesia's democratic history and established a template for religious populist action that continues to influence national politics.

The movement emerged in response to allegations that Ahok, a Christian of Chinese descent, had insulted the Quran during a campaign speech. Religious leaders, including Rizieq Shihab, quickly framed Ahok's alleged blasphemy as evidence of broader threats to Islamic values from secular elites and religious minorities. This framing transformed specific grievances against an individual politician into a broader populist narrative positioning pious Muslims as the authentic "people" defending their faith against corrupt secular authorities [13].

The movement's organization revealed religious populism's distinctive mobilization capabilities in Indonesia. Traditional Islamic networks, including mosques, Islamic schools (*pesantren*), and alumni associations, provided organizational infrastructure, while social media platforms enabled rapid information sharing and coordination. The movement's inclusive religious framing transcended traditional divisions between modernist and traditionalist Islamic organizations, creating an unprecedented coalition of diverse Islamic groups [28].

The 212 Movement's political impact extended far beyond Ahok's eventual electoral defeat and criminal conviction. It empowered more assertive expressions of Islamic identity in public life, pressured secular politicians to demonstrate religious credentials, and established religious populism as a potentially decisive electoral force. Jokowi's selection of conservative cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his 2019 running mate represented a direct response to this new political reality.

This case study demonstrates how religious populism in Indonesia operates through a combination of traditional networks and modern communication technologies, frames political conflicts in moral-religious terms rather than socioeconomic ones, and establishes religious authenticity as a criterion for legitimate political leadership. It reveals both the mobilizing potential of religious populism and its capacity to pressure even nonreligious political actors to accommodate religious demands.

6.4 Anies Baswedan: Combining technocratic competence with religious populism

Anies Baswedan's governorship of Jakarta (2017–2022) offers an illuminating case study in how Indonesian politicians can strategically combine elements of technocratic and religious populism. His evolution from education reformer to religious-affiliated politician demonstrates the strategic flexibility characteristic of Indonesian populist leadership.

Anies initially built his reputation through education reform advocacy and his leadership of Paramadina University. His appointment as Education Minister under Jokowi positioned him as a progressive technocrat. However, his 2017 gubernatorial campaign revealed his capacity to adapt religious populist messaging when he allied with conservative Islamic groups against incumbent Ahok [29].

During the campaign, Anies employed religious symbolism and emphasized “indigenous” (pribumi) rights in ways that resonated with the religious populist narratives of the 212 Movement. His campaign slogan of “Advanced and Just Jakarta” (Jakarta Maju dan Berkeadilan) combined technocratic promises of urban development with moral-religious conceptions of social justice. This strategic pivot demonstrated the fluid boundaries between technocratic and religious populism in Indonesian politics [30].

As governor, Anies implemented policies that maintained this dual appeal. His expansion of the Zero Down Payment housing program established direct relationships with lower-income beneficiaries characteristic of technocratic populism. Simultaneously, his accommodation of conservative religious perspectives—including restrictions on nightlife venues and alcohol sales—signaled continued alignment with religious constituencies. His urban planning approach emphasized community participation through programs like Community Action Plans (CAP) that bypassed bureaucratic processes to establish direct connections between his administration and ordinary Jakartans [31].

Anies's communication style similarly balanced technocratic expertise with religious populist framing. His sophisticated use of social media and willingness to engage directly with communities through site visits maintained a popular connection despite his elite educational background. Meanwhile, his increased appearances at religious events and adoption of Anies's communication style similarly balanced technocratic expertise with religious populist framing. His sophisticated use of social media and willingness to engage directly with communities through site visits maintained a popular connection despite his elite educational background. Meanwhile, his

increased appearances at religious events and adoption of religious terminology in policy discussions reinforced his connection with Muslim constituencies mobilized during the 2017 election [1].

This case study illustrates how Indonesian politicians can strategically combine technocratic and religious populist elements to build diverse coalitions. It demonstrates the permeability between populist categories in Indonesia's pluralistic environment and reveals how religious populism can be integrated with governance competence rather than positioned against it.

These four case studies spanning technocratic, confrontational, and religious manifestations of Indonesian populism provide an empirical foundation for analyzing the broader implications of populist politics for Indonesia's democratic development.

7. Implications of populism for Indonesia's democratic development

7.1 Democratic deepening vs. democratic erosion

The relationship between populism and democracy in Indonesia reveals complex patterns of both democratic deepening and potential erosion. On one hand, populist mobilizations have expanded political participation by engaging previously marginalized citizens and forcing political elites to be more responsive to popular concerns. Religious populist movements have incorporated devout Muslims more fully into democratic processes, while technocratic populists have created more direct accountability between leaders and citizens [2].

On the other hand, certain populist tendencies threaten democratic consolidation by undermining institutional checks and balances. The personalization of power under populist leadership weakens bureaucratic independence and legislative oversight. Jokowi's executive-centric governance approach—including his expansion of presidential staff authority and strategic deployment of military officers in civilian positions—reflects this centralizing tendency common to populist governance [3]. Similarly, religious populist movements have sometimes challenged liberal democratic principles by promoting majoritarianism over minority protections.

This tension reflects the dual nature of populism in young democracies—simultaneously democratizing by challenging elite capture of institutions while potentially de-democratizing by weakening institutional constraints on executive power. Indonesia's experience suggests that the democratic impact of populism depends significantly on which institutions populists target as “corrupt” or “elite-captured” and which they respect as legitimate democratic channels [4].

7.2 Policy consequences: Substantive vs. symbolic outcomes

Indonesian populism's policy consequences similarly reveal mixed patterns. Populist governance has delivered tangible benefits in infrastructure development, social welfare expansion, and public service accessibility. Jokowi's massive infrastructure program has improved connectivity across the archipelago, while his expanded health insurance and conditional cash transfer programs have reduced poverty and vulnerability [5]. These substantive outcomes demonstrate populism's potential to translate popular demands into concrete policy changes.

However, Indonesian populism has also produced merely symbolic policies that address symptoms rather than the structural causes of problems. Religious populists' emphasis on moral regulations often fails to address underlying socioeconomic inequalities or governance deficiencies. Similarly, nationalist resource policies sometimes generate short-term political benefits while failing to create sustainable development models or economic diversification [6].

This pattern reflects populism's preference for visible, attributable policies over complex structural reforms that might generate resistance from powerful interests. Indonesian populists across ideological variants typically seek quick wins that can be directly attributed to leadership rather than institutional improvements with diffuse or delayed benefits. This tendency helps explain why Indonesian populism has delivered impressive progress in some areas while leaving fundamental economic and political structures largely intact.

7.3 Social cohesion and pluralism: Inclusion vs. polarization

Perhaps the most concerning implication of Indonesian populism involves its complex effects on social cohesion in a diverse society. Religious populist movements have increased political participation among conservative Muslims, but sometimes at the cost of heightened religious polarization. The targeting of ethnic Chinese and Christian politicians through populist mobilizations has strained Indonesia's pluralist traditions and raised concerns about the erosion of tolerance [7].

Nationalist populism similarly presents mixed implications for social cohesion. Economic nationalist policies may enhance national sovereignty and reduce inequality, potentially strengthening civic nationalism that transcends ethnic and religious divisions. However, when combined with nativist rhetoric, such policies can exacerbate communal tensions by defining the "authentic people" in exclusionary ethnic or religious terms [8].

Technocratic populism offers partial remedies to these polarizing tendencies through its emphasis on practical problem-solving rather than identity-based mobilization. Jokowi's infrastructure-focused populism attempts to build national unity around shared development goals rather than exclusionary identity politics. However, such approaches often lack the emotional mobilizing power of identity-based populism, limiting their effectiveness in countering religious populist narratives [9].

This complex relationship between populism and pluralism reveals the contingent nature of populism's social impact in diverse societies like Indonesia. The specific ways populists define "the people" and their relationship to "others" significantly determine whether populist politics enhances inclusion or exacerbates division.

8. Conclusion: Future trajectories of Indonesian populism

This comprehensive examination of populism in Indonesia's post-reform democracy reveals several distinctive characteristics and evolving dynamics that will shape the country's political future. As Indonesia navigates its third decade of democratic governance, populism appears firmly established as a significant feature of its political landscape rather than a transitory phenomenon. However, the particular forms this populism takes remain contingent on evolving economic conditions, institutional developments, and leadership personalities.

8.1 Key findings: The distinctive character of Indonesian populism

This analysis has identified several characteristics that distinguish Indonesian populism from variants observed in other regions:

First, Indonesian populism operates through a complex interplay of secular-nationalist and religious-conservative dimensions, often synthesizing elements from both traditions rather than maintaining rigid separation between them. This hybridity reflects Indonesia's distinctive national identity as a religious society with secular constitutional foundations.

Second, Indonesian populists typically work within formal democratic institutions while informally concentrating power and bypassing institutional constraints. Unlike populists elsewhere who openly attack constitutional limitations, Indonesian populist leaders maintain procedural legitimacy while establishing direct connections with citizens that circumvent institutional intermediaries.

Third, Indonesian populism manifests through distinctive governance mechanisms, including personalistic communication strategies, visible attributable policies, direct welfare programs, and strategic deployment of nationalist and religious symbolism. These mechanisms establish leader-citizen connections while accommodating elite interests through pragmatic coalition management.

Fourth, Indonesian populism spans a spectrum from technocratic to confrontational approaches, with leaders like Jokowi exemplifying the former and figures like Prabowo representing the latter. This diversity of populist expressions creates a dynamic political landscape where multiple populist visions compete for electoral support.

Finally, religious networks and symbols play particularly significant roles in Indonesian populist mobilization, reflecting the society's deep religious foundations and the organizational resources religious institutions provide for political mobilization. The increasing prominence of religious populism since the 2016–2017 anti-Ahok demonstrations represents a potentially transformative development in Indonesia's political evolution.

8.2 Current president's relationship to populism

Does Indonesia's current president qualify as "populist" according to established theoretical frameworks? The evidence presented in this analysis suggests a qualified affirmative answer. Joko Widodo exhibits key characteristics associated with technocratic-nationalist populism: anti-elite positioning through his outsider background and man-of-the-people communication style; claims to embody the authentic voice of ordinary Indonesians through his humble origins and direct engagement; policy emphasis on visible benefits that establish direct attribution between leadership and outcomes; and strategic deployment of nationalist rhetoric, particularly regarding economic sovereignty.

However, several factors complicate this categorization. Jokowi has maintained consistent respect for democratic institutions and pluralist principles that distinguish him from more confrontational populists elsewhere. His pragmatic accommodation of elite interests through coalition appointments contradicts purely anti-establishment positioning. His governance emphasizes practical problem-solving rather than ideological transformation. These nuances suggest that Jokowi represents a distinctly Indonesian variant of "moderate populism" that combines populist communication strategies with pragmatic governance approaches.

This observation aligns with the concept of technocratic populism—a distinctively Southeast Asian variant that emphasizes performance legitimacy and practical problem-solving rather than fundamental system transformation. Jokowi's balancing of populist communication with institutional respect demonstrates how populism adapts to Indonesia's specific democratic context [7].

8.3 Future scenarios: Competing populisms in Indonesia's democratic landscape

Looking ahead, several potential trajectories for Indonesian populism emerge from this analysis, each with significant implications for democratic quality:

The first scenario involves continued dominance of technocratic populism, with future leaders building on Jokowi's template of combining practical governance with populist communication strategies. This path would likely maintain democratic stability while gradually expanding executive authority within constitutional boundaries. Economic development would receive priority over ideological transformation, with pragmatic accommodation of diverse interests rather than polarizing mobilization. This scenario offers democratic continuity with gradual institutional evolution rather than revolutionary change.

The second scenario envisions ascendant religious populism that more explicitly mobilizes Islamic identity as the basis for political legitimacy. This trajectory would intensify identity polarization while potentially marginalizing religious minorities from leadership positions despite constitutional protections. Governance would increasingly emphasize moral and religious considerations alongside practical development needs. Democratic institutions would face greater pressure to accommodate religious perspectives in legislation and regulation, potentially constraining individual rights in favor of communal religious values.

A third scenario involves confrontational-nationalist populism gaining electoral traction through economic grievances, particularly if global economic turbulence increases unemployment or inequality. This path would likely feature more aggressive economic nationalism, confrontational foreign policy positions, and potentially authoritarian governance tendencies justified through appeals to national sovereignty and security. Democratic institutions would face more direct challenges under this scenario, with a greater risk of democratic backsliding despite formal maintenance of electoral processes.

Finally, a fourth scenario suggests a potential populist synthesis that combines elements from multiple traditions. Future leaders might strategically deploy both technocratic competence and identity appeals, economic nationalism and religious symbolism, institutional respect, and direct citizen mobilization. This hybrid approach could either moderate populism's anti-pluralist tendencies through pragmatic compromise or amplify its democratic risks through combined mobilization strategies.

8.4 Theoretical and practical implications

This analysis has significant implications for scholarly understanding of populism and practical approaches to democratic resilience in Indonesia and beyond.

Theoretically, the Indonesian case demonstrates the need for more nuanced populism frameworks that account for non-Western democratic contexts. The oversimplified dichotomy between democracy and populism that characterizes some Western scholarship fails to capture the complex interplay between populist leadership and

democratic development in newer democracies. Indonesia's experience suggests that populism can simultaneously stimulate democratic participation while challenging institutional development, requiring more sophisticated assessment frameworks than simple democratic-antidemocratic binaries.

For democratic practitioners and policymakers, Indonesia's experience offers several lessons for building resilience against populism's anti-pluralist tendencies. Strong and independent judicial institutions have proven particularly important in checking executive overreach despite populist pressures. Vibrant civil society organizations provide essential countervailing power when populist leaders bypass institutional constraints. Media literacy initiatives become increasingly vital as social media algorithms intensify populist polarization. And deliberate efforts to maintain cross-cutting political cleavages rather than allowing single identity dimensions to dominate political competition help moderate populism's divisive potential.

As Indonesia commemorates more than two decades of democratic governance, populism is both a democratic resource and a risk, mobilizing citizen engagement while potentially undermining institutional development and social cohesion. The country's ability to harness populism's participatory energy while constraining its anti-pluralist tendencies will significantly determine whether Indonesia consolidates its democratic achievements or experiences democratic regression in the coming decades.

The Indonesian experience ultimately reveals that populism is neither inherently democratic nor antidemocratic, but rather a political logic whose implications depend on the specific contexts in which it operates, the leaders who deploy it, and the institutional frameworks that channel it. As one of the world's largest and most diverse democracies, Indonesia's management of populist politics carries significance far beyond its borders for understanding democracy's resilience in an age of global populist resurgence.

Acronyms and abbreviations

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok)	former Governor of Jakarta, known for his reformist policies and as the target of religious populist mobilization
Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial (BPJS)	Indonesia's national social security agency responsible for administering health insurance
Community Action Plans (CAP)	a participatory urban planning initiative used to empower local communities in Jakarta
Front Pembela Islam (FPI)	Islamic Defenders Front, a hardline Islamist organization active in religious populist mobilization
International Monetary Fund (IMF)	a global financial institution that influenced Indonesia's economic policy during the post-Suharto era
Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP)	Smart Indonesia Card
Kantor Staf Presiden (KSP)	Presidential Staff Office, an executive institution under the

Manifesto Politik	Indonesian President for policy coordination and communication Undang-Undang Dasar 1945, Sosialisme Indonesia, Demokrasi Terpimpin, Ekonomi Terpimpin, Kepribadian Indonesia (MANIPOL-USDEK) Sukarno's ideological framework during the Guided Democracy era
Nasionalisme, Agama, Komunisme (Nasakom)	Sukarno's ideological synthesis of nationalism, religion, and communism during the early postindependence period
Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH)	a conditional cash transfer program aimed at reducing poverty and improving human capital
Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS)	Prosperous Justice Party, an Islamist political party known for technocratic-religious populism
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY)	Indonesia's sixth president (2004–2014), known for his cautious technocratic-populist style of governance

Author details

Isnaini Muallidin^{1*} and Heroe Waskito²

¹ Department of Government Affairs and Administration and Jusuf Kalla School of Government Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

² Independent Researcher, Indonesia

*Address all correspondence to: isnainimuallidin@gmail.com

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Section 2

Democracy and Illiberal Transformation: Populism in Central and Eastern Europe

Chapter 4

Perspectives on the 2024–2025 Presidential Elections in Romania

Oana I. Armeanu

Abstract

This chapter examines the remarkable unfolding of the 2024–2025 presidential elections in Romania and their impact on the democratic process: (1) the ascension to the top of a little known far-right candidate, Călin Georgescu in the 2024 first round following Russia's interference in the electoral process through social media; (2) the annulment of this election and the banning of Georgescu from running in the rescheduled 2025 election, and (3) the unprecedented victory of an independent candidate, Nicușor Dan over the far-right candidate George Simion in the 2025 runoff. I discuss the three rounds of presidential elections, including the controversies generated by the annulment of the 2024 election. The elections occurred in the context of growing support for the far-right, which has used its popularity to fuel social divisions between a sovereigntist and a pro-European Union camp. Using election and census data and a mixed model regression, I show that support for the far-right candidates comes predominantly from localities with a low ethnic diversity, rural, with a young population, and less developed. The analysis reveals both the fragility and the resilience of democratic institutions and the significant challenges facing the new government amid a deeply divided society.

Keywords: presidential election, sovereigntist, Calin Georgescu, George Simion, Nicusor Dan, far-right, alliance for the union of Romanians, AUR, Romania

1. Introduction

The Romanian presidential elections revealed a deep split between those who prioritize national sovereignty and are skeptical of closer European ties, and those who support stronger integration with the European Union. Leading far-right, sovereigntist figures like Călin Georgescu and George Simion pushed for Romania to remain neutral between the East and the West [1]. Moreover, they criticized European efforts to support Ukraine, showed sympathy for Russia, and used popular discontent to amplify existing social divisions. The elections promoted them to the forefront and punished the candidates of the mainstream parties. A similar development was also manifest in the November 2024 parliamentary elections, which had led to the considerable weakening of the governing coalition—the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), while the far-right gained 35% of the

parliamentary seats. In addition, the first round of the 2024 presidential election saw a massive cyberattack on TikTok and other social media platforms by Russia with the intent to influence the election outcome [2, 3]. The election interference propelled to the top the far-right and pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu, a political figure little known to the public.

In an unprecedented move, the Romanian Constitutional Court (CCR) annulled the 2024 presidential election, a decision motivated by the manipulation of the electoral process using social media and the illegal campaign conducted by Călin Georgescu [4]. In a similar vein, the CCR approved Central Electoral Commission's decision to reject the candidacy of Călin Georgescu in the 2025 presidential elections. The court argued that the manipulation of the electoral process in favor of Georgescu unfairly disadvantaged the other candidates and therefore was unconstitutional [4]. The exclusion of Georgescu opened the door to new candidates in 2025. The candidate of the governing coalition lost in the first round, which is a measure of the popular dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties. The 2025 second round took place between Nicușor Dan, the mayor of the capital city Bucharest, and George Simion, a far-right candidate and the leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Dan's victory as an independent was novel in Romania, where successful presidential candidates have usually been supported by large parties and electoral alliances.

The popular frustration expressed by these results has built slowly over time, being a consequence of a low standard of living—second to last in the EU [5], a lack of adequate economic opportunities, having one of the highest energy prices in Europe [6], a large emigration of workers, and anger at the mainstream political parties for lack of effectiveness and corruption [7]. Since 2021, the PSD-PNL governing coalition had engaged in strengthening control over the power mechanisms at the central and local levels, systematically undercutting the opposition parties and the independent media, and appointing their loyalists in the electoral institutions, such as the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP). This has generated concerns of potential bias toward the mainstream parties in the 2024 electoral process through the control of the AEP [7]. The corruption and abuse of power had run rampant both at the national and at local levels, where the so-called local barons have used public contracts for personal enrichment [7, 8]. Meanwhile, the GDP growth rate was less than 1% in 2024, homeownership has dropped by 1.3% compared to 2023 [9], home prices had gone up, and gas prices had been increasing since 2020. Despite these developments, most of the population supports the European Union, toward which it has a more favorable view than the rest of the European countries [10].

This analysis covers the three rounds of the presidential elections and the controversies generated by the annulment of the 2024 election. Using election and census data and a mixed model regression, I analyze the support for candidates at the locality level. Public opinion data provide additional insights into the characteristics of electorates of the top candidates. I conclude with a discussion of the main lessons to be drawn from these elections, which highlights the vulnerability and the strength of democratic institutions and underscores the future difficulties of bridging deep social divides.

2. 2024 presidential election, first round, November 24

Presidential elections in Romania take place using a two-round system. If no candidate wins a simple majority in the first round, the top two candidates compete

in the second round. The first round of the Romanian presidential election took place on November 24, 2024, and was annulled by the Constitutional Court on December 6. The court based its reasoning on declassified documents provided by the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, showing interference in the electoral process in favor of Călin Georgescu [4]. According to documents of the Supreme Council of National Security, Călin Georgescu had reached the top position in the first round because of a concerted social media campaign similar to the campaigns that Russia used previously in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova [11]. The campaign took place mostly on TikTok, also on Facebook, and Instagram in the 2 weeks preceding the election, leading to an increase in popularity for Călin Georgescu from less than 1% in early October, when he was largely unknown to the public, to over 10% support in the days immediately prior to the election, according to opinion polls (see **Figure 1**). Georgescu's TikTok campaign used 25,000 coordinated accounts, which multiplied the message using paid influencers [2, 22]. Although Georgescu declared zero electoral spending during the campaign and did not have campaign headquarters, the estimated social media campaign cost was over €1 million [2].

Opinion polls conducted before the final list of presidential candidates were approved on October 10, 2024, did not include Călin Georgescu, because his intent to run was not known at that time. The polls underestimated widely the vote for Georgescu, who obtained about 23% of the votes (see **Table 1**), leading to the circulation of jokes according to which Romanians first elect their president and then they ask themselves “who is this guy?”

The candidates of governing parties, PSD and PNL underperformed greatly, revealing popular frustration with the coalition that has governed the country since November 2021. The results of the first round (see **Table 1**) are very close for Lasconi and Ciolacu, who were separated by only 2700 votes. Three main ideological groups can be identified: far-right (Georgescu and Simion) with about 37% vote share; center-right (Lasconi and Ciucă) with about 30% vote share; and center-left (Ciolacu

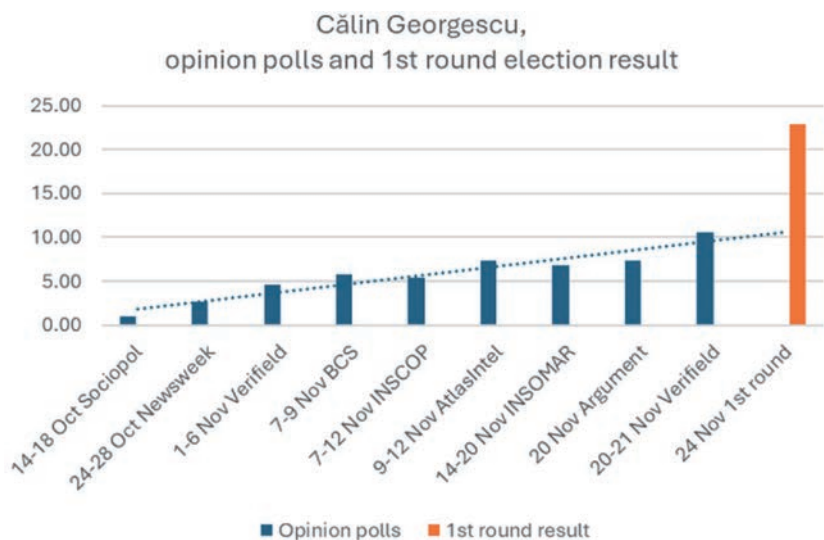


Figure 1. Support for Călin Georgescu in the first round of the 2024 presidential election: pre-election opinion polls and first-round election result. Sources: Sociopol, Newsweek, Verifield, BCS, INSCOP, AtlasIntel, INSOMAR, and Argument opinion polls [12–20]. Election data from the Permanent Electoral Authority [21].

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage of votes
Călin Georgescu	Independent	2,120,401	22.94
Elena Lasconi	Save Romania Union (USR)	1,772,500	19.18
Marcel Ciolacu	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	1,769,760	19.15
George Simion	Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	1,281,325	13.86
Nicolae Ciucă	National Liberal Party (PNL)	811,952	8.79
Mircea Geoană	Independent	583,898	6.32
Hunor Kelemen	Democratic Alliance of Hungarians (UDMR)	416,353	4.50
Cristian Diaconescu	Independent	286,842	3.10
Cristian Terheş	Romanian National Conservative Party	95,782	1.04 [*]

^{*}The results omit candidates who obtained less than 1%. Source: Permanent Electoral Authority 2024 [21].

Table 1.
Presidential election first round results, November 24, 2024.

and Geoană) with about 25% vote share. The decision of the Romanian Constitutional Court's to annul the second round of the 2024 presidential elections divided further the electorate. While 72% believed that the elections were influenced by a foreign power and 53% of the population considered it a necessary decision, 43% said it was not necessary, deepening the lack of trust in the democratic institutions [23]. Many people believed that the 2024 election was canceled because Ciolacu, the PSD candidate, did not enter the second round.

What was Georgescu's appeal to over two million voters? Some scholars attribute his success to his outsider image in the context of profound dissatisfaction with the governing coalition ([24], p. 104). Capitalizing on frustration with various socioeconomic issues and political corruption, he promised to put Romania back on its feet. His rhetoric included references to a glorious past and kings like Stephen the Great of the fifteenth century. He used the same playbook of "Make Romania Great Again" that has been applied by the far-right across the world, such as making Romania #1 in the world, rebuilding what had been destroyed by the previous governments, and finding "our own way" separate from the great powers. In particular, he promised large tax cuts; jobs for all; an improvement in public services such as health care, public transportation, housing, and bring home the diaspora. Many voters appreciated his stated love for the country's history, his support for the Romanian Orthodox Church, his criticism of previous governments, and the promise to bring about a positive change. Moreover, Georgescu referenced specific categories of the population, including farmers and the diaspora. His anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric resonated with many who felt left behind and who were not happy about the social inequalities that emerged in the last three decades and the emigration of the young population. He argued that the EU is interested only in getting access to Romania's resources but did nothing for Romania and NATO and will draw the country in a war with Russia [25], which resonates with the sovereigntists. In his electoral program titled "Food, water, energy," he was also the only candidate to refer to the importance of maintaining peace, a growing concern for Romanians since the start of the war in neighboring Ukraine, and he asked for disarmament. He proposed replacing conflict with cooperation based on Christian love [26].

Georgescu surpassed the more established far-right candidate George Simion by over 800,000 votes. Simion is the leader of the Alliance for the Romanian Unity (AUR). AUR

is a far-right party that has increased its share of parliamentary seats from 10% to 20% from 2020 to 2024 elections. Compared to the verbally and physically aggressive Simion, Georgescu appeared serious and academic, and thus more “presidential.”

Lasconi, the second placed candidate, was the leader of the Save Romania Union (USR) that did not belong to the mainstream political parties. Since 2020, she has been the mayor of Câmpulung Muscel, a small- to medium-size city in the Southern part of Romania. In her public appearances, Lasconi said that she was a different candidate from everyone else, not only for being the only woman in the race, but also for being an honest candidate concerned with the public good and with a record to show it. Among her promises was to address the corruption of the current governing coalition and to increase the independence of the justice system, which should be able to prosecute corruption cases without political pressure. In contrast to the divisive rhetoric of George Simion, she emphasized that she would be a president for all Romanians. Lasconi capitalized on her achievements as mayor using EU investment funds to develop Câmpulung’s infrastructure. Her electoral program advanced center-right policies, promising to stimulate the economy through a lower flat tax rate, support for small businesses, as well as small and medium size agricultural farms and agricultural distribution. Other proposals included: investments in infrastructure through increased use of European funds; improvements of education and healthcare services; elimination of pension privileges for special categories of public employees; administrative reform with the consolidation of localities; and development of nuclear and solar power. The program also advocated strengthening the relations with the UE, US, and NATO, supporting Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and standing against Putin’s Russia [27].

On the third place was Marcel Ciolacu, who had been the PSD president since 2020 and prime minister since 2023, leading the coalition of the PSD and PNL. The general expectation, which was supported by opinion polls, was that he would enter the second round. However, he got himself entangled in the Nordis corruption scandal, a real estate scheme based on selling the same apartment multiple times to different owners [28]. The scandal took place in 2022, but it was used as an electoral weapon in the weeks preceding the election and did enough damage to cause him to fall to third place after Georgescu and Lasconi. Ciolacu advanced a typical social-democratic agenda, with a focus on providing support for the less well-off categories of the population, which have been the traditional PSD voters [29]. Ciolacu’s electoral program referenced PSD’s past achievements of increasing the average wage to €1000 and the average pension to €500. Raising the standard of living and the quality of life to the EU average by 2029 occupied a prominent role in Ciolacu’s program [30]. Other notable points of the program were a reduction in poverty and social inequality; the creation of jobs through the re-industrialization of the economy and public investments in infrastructure, education, health care, and support for farmers. Ciolacu’s program also promised to support the return of the diaspora with simplified repatriation procedures and support for job market integration. Externally, Ciolacu’s policies were similar to those of Lasconi: support for the EU, NATO, US, and Ukraine, and condemnation of Russia’s war in Ukraine [30]. As one of the two largest parties that has been in government for more than half of the period since 1990, the PSD attracted a large portion of voters’ discontent in the 2024 elections. The rising popular frustration hit Ciolacu hard, as evident in the election results and the opinion polls discussed below.

The fourth placed candidate was George Simion, who was the leader of the AUR since the party was created in 2019. He had been a member of the Chamber of

Deputies since 2020 and a European parliamentarian since 2019. Simion had been constantly present in the public attention because of his controversial positions that led to his labeling as a fascist, but also participation in public protests and use of violence. He became known during the COVID-19 crisis, when he vocally opposed masking and vaccination, and was a fierce critic of the measures taken by the government to contain the pandemic. Among his positions were his aspiration for the recreation of the Greater Romania through reunification with the Republic of Moldova and Ukrainian territories. For his far-right and irredentist activities, he was banned for entering the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine [31]. Simion's campaign focused on providing affordable housing and a foreign policy based on neutrality. His top promise was to finance the construction of apartment complexes in suburban areas that would cost as little as €35,000, with €1000 downpayment and a zero-interest loan for 10–25 years [32, 33], which resonated with many people for whom current market prices make homeownership inaccessible. Additionally, he promised zero interest in refinancing existing mortgages between €35,000 and €70,000 [32, 33]. Simion also appealed to sovereigntists, emphasizing support for Romanians to achieve equal rights within Europe; strategic positioning of Romania between the East and the West; non-involvement in foreign conflicts; the rejection of attempts by the EU to limit the sovereignty of nation states; and the promotion of the interests of Romanian diaspora [32].

I compared the electorates of the top four candidates (Georgescu, Lasconi, Ciolacu, and Simion) at the locality level, identifying several important patterns. I used a mixed model regression with a random intercept, which treats locality variables as fixed effects, and a variable intercept accounts for the differences between counties. **Figure 2** indicates that the main determinants of voting are (1) the share of the Hungarian population, (2) urban versus rural locality, and (3) average population age, while (4) the level of socioeconomic development and (5) voter turnout play a smaller role. First, the negative sign of the coefficients for the share of the Hungarian population shows that all four candidates received higher support in localities with a lower share of Hungarian population, which was expected because the Hungarian minority, estimated at around one million (about 5% of the population), ran its own candidate. However, the differences are very large between the candidates, ranging from –3.6 for Georgescu to –1.05 for Lasconi, which indicates that the share of the Hungarian population mattered more in the support for Georgescu relative to the other candidates and that Georgescu did particularly well in localities with a low ethnic diversity, a result consistent with the previous findings for Romania in the 2020 elections [34] and for other Eastern European countries.

Second, the type of locality—urban versus rural, was insignificant in the support for Lasconi and Simion but played a large role in the support for Georgescu and Ciolacu. Georgescu received large support in urban areas, while Ciolacu's voters were predominantly rural, as expected for the PSD constituency. Third, the average population age of the locality played a small role in the support for Simion and Lasconi, who were favored by a younger population. Age played a larger role in the support for Georgescu, who was backed by a younger population, and for Ciolacu, whose support came more from the older population, again as expected for the candidate of the PSD. The contrast between Georgescu and Ciolacu shows that they have different bases of support, and that Georgescu's voters are not the poorest in society.

Fourth, development was measured as an index of local human development [35]. We observe that support for Georgescu and Lasconi was higher in localities with a higher level of development, while support for Ciolacu and Simion

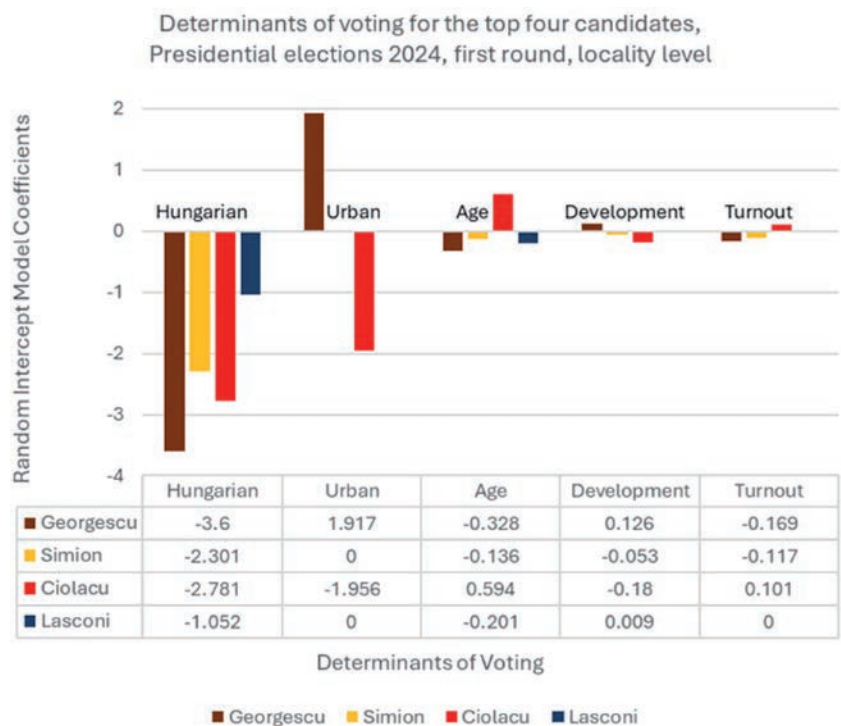


Figure 2.
Random intercept models of vote for the top four candidates in the first round of 2024 presidential elections, November 24.

was stronger in localities with a lower level of development. Fifth, voter turnout played a small role for all candidates. The effect was insignificant for Lasconi, negative for Georgescu and Simion, and positive for Ciolacu. The results support the findings of recent studies showing that far-right parties and candidates benefit from a lower voter turnout [34, 36].

3. 2025 presidential election, first round, May 4

The annulment of the second round of 2024 elections confused and divided Romanian voters. Opinion polls revealed that 53% of the respondents agreed with the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the election, while 43% of the respondents disagreed with it [23]. A few of Georgescu's supporters organized violent protests in Bucharest to show their anger, some of which gathered several thousand people. The protesters demanded the recognition of the election results and the resignation of the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis [37]. Eventually, the president resigned in February 2025 under the threat of a referendum that would have removed him from office. However, the cancelled 2024 elections remained, and new elections were scheduled for May 2025. Unexpectedly, the Central Electoral Commission rejected Călin Georgescu's candidacy to participate in the 2025 presidential election, because his November 2024 online campaign had led to a significant distortion of the result, in violation of the Constitution [38]. The decision was reinforced by the Constitutional Court on March 11, 2025, and was broadly supported across the EU but criticized

by the US administration [39]. In the same vein, the Constitutional Court rejected the candidacy of Diana Șoșoacă, another far-right candidate, arguing that Șoșoacă had shown through her public discourse and actions that she did not respect the Constitution and the fundamental principles of democracy and rule of law, which she would be required to guarantee if elected [40].

The slate of candidates looks different in the first round of 2025 compared to the first round of 2024 election, because of the absence of Călin Georgescu and the entry of three new candidates in the race, Nicușor Dan, Crin Antonescu, and Victor Ponta. At a closer examination, the top three candidates are, however, very similar in 2025 and 2024. At the top are the far-right candidates Georgescu and Simion. On the second place are Lasconi and Dan, both candidates not associated with the governing coalition. The third position is occupied by Ciolacu and Antonescu, the candidates of the governing coalition. This should come as no surprise considering the relatively short time between the 2024 and 2025 elections, which left voters' preferences largely unchanged. We note, however, that the vote is more concentrated in the top four candidates in 2025 compared to 2024 (95 vs. 75%, respectively, see **Tables 1** and **2**), which is likely due to strategic voting for the candidates most likely to enter the runoff. Unsurprisingly, Simion came first, cumulating his votes with those of Georgescu, whom he promised to appoint prime minister if elected [31].

Nicușor Dan entered the race as an independent in December 2024 after the annulment of the 2024 election. His motivation to run was influenced by the requests he received from civic organizations and politicians, who feared that Lasconi could not defeat Georgescu, as indicated in the opinion polls [42]. At the time, Lasconi was the leader and the official candidate of the USR, but by April 2025 the party switched its support from Lasconi to Dan, who performed better in the polls. Although Dan scored better than Lasconi, he trailed Crin Antonescu, the candidate of the governing coalition in the polls during the campaign. Eventually, he overtook Antonescu by less than 87,000 votes, entering the second round 2025 against Simion.

Nicușor Dan is far from the conventional politician. A mathematician who won two international Mathematics Olympiads and has a Ph.D. in mathematics at Sorbonne, he talks little and avoids public appearances. This worried his supporters when he faced Simion in the 2025 runoff. He was also the only candidate not married who has been in a long-term relationship with a woman with whom he has two children, a potential concern for the socially conservative voters [43]. After several years of civic activism to save historical buildings in Bucharest, Dan's political career started in 2012 when he ran unsuccessfully as an independent in Bucharest's mayoral race. A second unsuccessful attempt to win the contest for mayor of Bucharest followed in

Candidate	Party/Alliance	Votes	Percentage of votes
George Simion	Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	3,862,761	40.96
Nicușor Dan	Independent	1,979,767	20.99
Crin Antonescu	Romania Forward Alliance	1,892,930	20.07
Victor Ponta	Independent	1,230,164	13.04
Elena Lasconi	Save Romania Union (USR)	252,721	2.68 [*]

^{*}The results omit candidates who obtained less than 1%. Source: Permanent Electoral Authority 2025 [41].

Table 2.
Presidential election first round results, May 4, 2025.

2016 on the lists of the newly established Save Bucharest Union (USB). Emboldened by the USB's results in Bucharest, where he came in second place for mayor and his party obtained the second largest number of city councilors, Dan transformed the USB in the national party Save Romania Union (USR) in 2016, a center-right party that has been the fourth largest in the Parliament after the 2024 elections. In 2017 he left USR because of disagreements over the party's direction and subsequently won the race for mayor of Bucharest in 2020 and 2024 as an independent.

Dan ran a campaign that shared many similarities to Lasconi's campaign. He focused on increase in exports and European investments; administrative reform through the consolidation of territorial units; reduction in fiscal evasion and public spending; health care and education reform, and fight against corruption. A proposal different from all the other candidates' programs was to stimulate economic development based on state-promoted strategic areas and the creation of a strategic national champion in energy, following the French model. In the social domain, his program included improving women's participation in the job market, combating domestic violence, support for families, and improvements in housing and senior care. In foreign policy, he supported further integration with NATO, US, and the EU and increasing the defense spending to 3.5% of GDP according to NATO's spending targets [44].

Crin Antonescu was the candidate of the governing coalition. A former leader of the PNL, he also ran unsuccessfully in the 2009 presidential election. Antonescu had been the acting president of Romania for a short time in 2012, but he had not been active in politics in the decade prior to the 2025 elections. His approach advanced a center-right vision that included support for businesses, attracting investments, and supporting the development of new technologies. Foreign policy occupied an important role in his program, in particular a commitment to strengthen relations with the EU, an indication of the coalition's pro-European position. Increasing security against cyberattacks and energy security were two of his other priorities [45].

Victor Ponta ran as an independent, but it was difficult to disassociate himself from the PSD, whose leader he was from 2010 to 2015. He had also run unsuccessfully for the presidency of Romania in 2014. As a prime minister from 2012 to 2015, he was involved in several corruption scandals [46]. Ponta resigned in 2015 because of the protests following the deadly Colectiv club fire, in which several dozen young people died. During the campaign, his slogan Romania First reflects his attempt to align with the growing nationalist movement worldwide. His electoral program overlaps in part with those of Călin Georgescu and George Simion in the emphasis on sovereignty, putting the national interest first, and not being led by external institutions [47].

Elena Lasconi obtained less than one million votes, ending in fifth place. Two main factors led to her low electoral performance. Mainly, the entry of Nicușor Dan in the race, a candidate that competed for the same voters, changed the dynamic of the competition. Dan had quickly surpassed Lasconi in the polls. As a result, her own party USR shifted its support to Dan, a move that Lasconi contested [48]. Because she was the president of the party while Dan was an independent, Lasconi declared it to be a betrayal. She remained in the race, despite the pressures to withdraw to avoid splitting the vote with Dan. The second factor that contributed to her low result was the public perception that she lacked political experience and was not prepared to address major political topics, particularly in foreign and security policy. The aftermath of the 2024 election cyberattack had left the population feeling vulnerable, and her lack of a clear understanding of foreign policy priorities was seen as an important disqualifier [49].

4. 2025 presidential election, second round, May 18

George Simion and Nicușor Dan entered the second round of the elections, held on May 18. Neither candidate belonged to the governing coalition, which highlights the broad frustration with the governance in Romania and the willingness to vote for alternative candidates and solutions, even anti-establishment candidates like Simion. Simion and Dan resembled very closely Georgescu and Lasconi, the candidates that would have participated in the canceled 2024 runoff. They represent the same division of the electorate between a sovereigntist/nationalist camp and a pro-European/progressive camp.

Simion and Dan confronted each other directly in a single debate, during which they both performed well. Dan managed to improve his public perception that penned him as lacking communication skills, showing that he was capable to articulate his ideas, responding to attacks, and counterattacking his opponent [50]. His campaign also attempted to make him appear more relatable to people by using his first name rather than his last name, which the moderators also used during the debate and how the public frequently refers to him. Opinion polls showed the two candidates in a close race until the very end, making it difficult to anticipate the winner. As the campaign advanced, Simion's public performance declined, which likely did not affect his support among his core voters but may have cost him the votes of the undecided.

Nicușor Dan scored a clear victory with a margin of over 7% of the votes (see **Table 3**). His victory was helped by the redistribution of votes from Antonescu (83.5%), Lasconi (81.2%), and Ponta (62%), according to a CURS exit poll (See **Figure 3**) [52]. The mobilization of an additional one million voters in the second round through a grassroots effort also helped Dan. Within the territory of Romania, Dan benefited mostly from redistribution from the other candidates, while in diaspora he benefited mostly from new votes, winning over 70% of the 670,000 new votes (see **Tables 3** and **4**). Diaspora votes were sharply divided geographically between Europe, where majority votes went to Simion and the rest of the world, where majority votes went to Dan [51]. Voter turnout increased from 53.21% in the first round 2025 to 55.57% in the second round (measured without the diaspora vote for which voter registration is not required, see **Table 4**) [41, 51].

Exit poll data also revealed important differences between the electorates of the two candidates. Nicușor Dan received predominant support in Bucharest (77.8% for Dan vs. 22.2% for Simion) and in urban areas generally (61.8% for Dan vs. 38.2% for Simion). His support was also higher among the college educated (74.5% for Dan vs. 25.5% for Simion, see **Figure 4**) and women (59.4% for Dan vs. 40.6 for Simion) [52].

I compared the characteristics of the electorates of the two candidates at the locality level (See **Figure 5**). Using a mixed model regression (random intercept

Candidate	Number of votes			Percentage of votes
	Total	Romania	Diaspora	
Nicușor Dan (Ind)	6,168,642	5,445,052	723,590	53.60
George Simion (AUR)	5,339,053	4,426,247	912,806	46.40

Source: Permanent electoral authority 2025 [51].

Table 3.
Second round results, May 18, presidential election 2025.

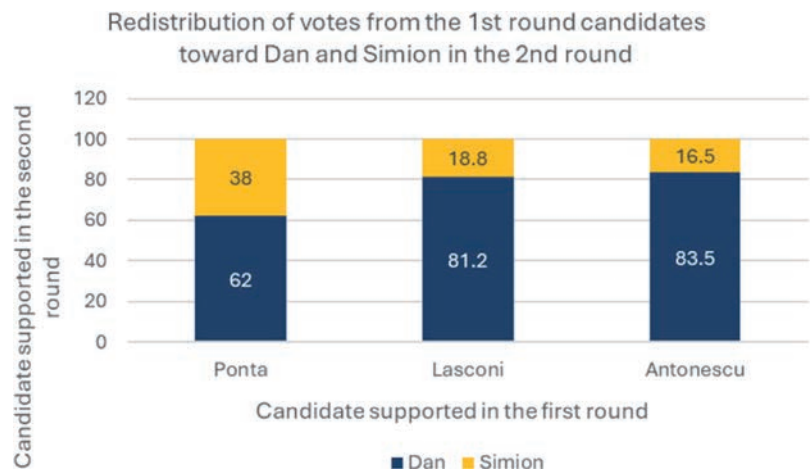


Figure 3.
Redistribution of votes from the first-round candidates toward Dan and Simion in the second round. Source: CURS exit poll, second round, May 18, 2025 [52].

Election	Number of votes			Voter turnout without diaspora (%)
	Total	Romania	Diaspora	
First round, 11/24/2024	10,044,007	9,242,186	801,821	52.55
First round, 5/04/2025	10,396,280	9,430,274	966,006	53.21
Second round, 5/18/2025	11,507,695	9,871,299	1,636,396	55.57

Source: Permanent electoral authority 2025 [21, 41, 51].

Table 4.
Voter turnout, presidential elections 2024–2025.

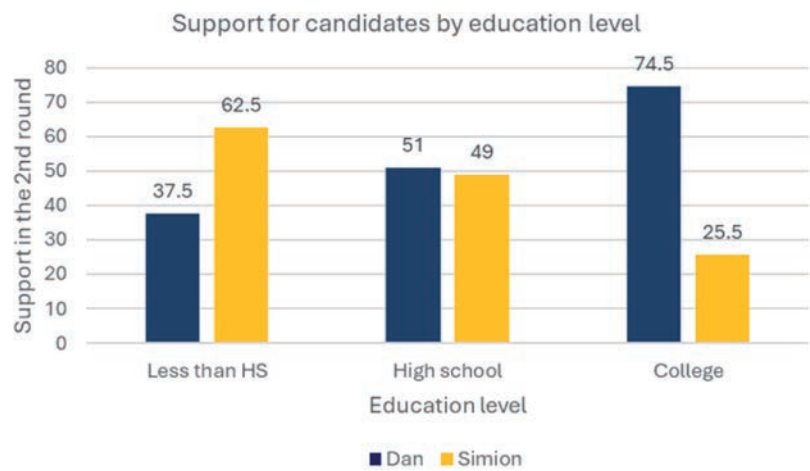


Figure 4.
Support for Dan and Simion in the second round by education level. Source: CURS exit poll, second round, May 18, 2025 [52].

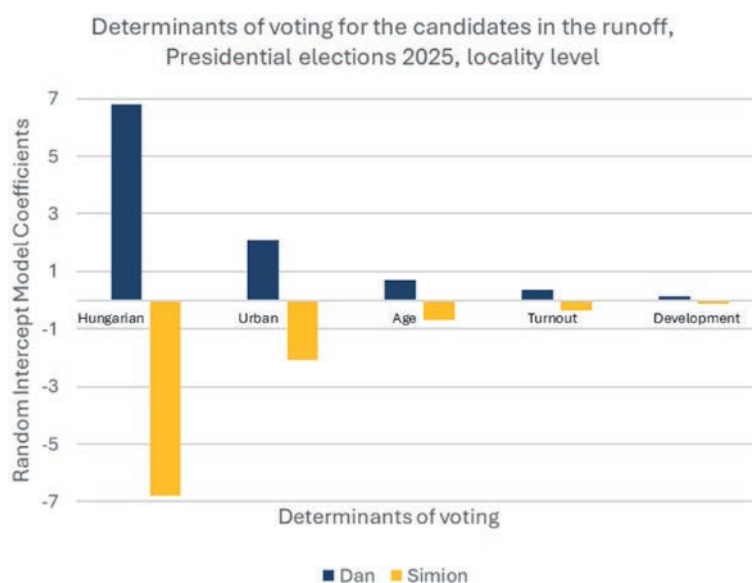


Figure 5.
Random intercept models of vote for Dan and Simion in the second round of 2025 presidential elections in Romania, May 18.

model), the patterns of support for the two candidates can be identified. Support for Nicușor Dan came primarily from the areas with a large share of Hungarian population, urban areas, older voters, and more developed areas. Additionally, a higher turnout benefited Dan. Conversely, Simion received support mainly from areas with a low Hungarian population, rural, a younger population, and less developed. A low voter turnout also benefited Simion, reinforcing the results of the analysis conducted on the first round of 2024 presidential elections (See **Figure 2**), which also indicated that the electorate of the far-right candidates is more mobilized than that of the mainstream parties. The results also reveal that development played a small role in the vote, suggesting that cultural factors, such as the exposure to a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment, were more important than economic factors. Older population's support for Dan indicates that older voters are more likely to reject far-right candidates, political extremism and violence, particularly that candidates like Simion and Georgescu claim direct connection to the interwar fascist Iron Guard [53]. Those associations have a less negative significance for the younger voters.

5. Discussion

This chapter shows both the fragility and the resilience of democracy when it is systematically attacked by external forces in conjunction with internal actors. The annulment of the 2024 presidential elections in Romania because of Russia's interference to promote Călin Georgescu, a candidate previously unknown, has revealed deeper issues of democratic governance that have been developing in the last few years. The chaos created by the COVID-19 pandemic had created an opportunity for the rise of the far-right party AUR, whose leader George Simion has since used every

opportunity to undermine the democratic institutions, revive fascist ideas, encourage political violence, and advance an alternative vision for Romania between the East and the West [34, 54]. These actions, which were carried out largely on social media, have increased social tensions, dividing the population between a sovereigntist and a pro-European camp. The analysis of the presidential election results of the first round of 2024 elections and the two rounds of the rescheduled 2025 elections revealed further insights into the rise of far-right candidates and the manipulation of the electoral process.

First, the 2024 Romanian presidential election shows the ease of large-scale manipulation of the electoral process using social media, resulting in the advancement to first position of a candidate largely unknown to the public. Russia, the state actor involved, had the know-how and large resources at its disposal. However, the resources used were in fact relatively small, suggesting that many state and non-state actors may have the funding to rig democratic elections using the complacency of social media platforms such as TikTok.

Second, the annulment of the second round 2024 and the elimination of Călin Georgescu from the race did not change the preferences of the electorate. Faced with new candidates, the voters still placed the far-right candidate in the first position, followed by a candidate not associated with the governing coalition, which is exactly what they did in November 2024. However, candidates matter and apparently the rerun of the election in 2025 has changed the outcome. In December 2024, Georgescu was leading with 58%, while only 42% supported Lasconi, according to opinion polls [42]. In contrast, the balance shifted in 2025 in favor of Dan, who was perceived as more experienced than Lasconi, while Simion was less liked than Georgescu because of his violent streak.

Third, far-right actors such as Georgescu and Simion take advantage of existing economic, political, and social tensions, which they amplify through social media. In this sense, they are both a consequence of popular frustrations and a further cause of them, taking them on a vicious spiral of escalation. The share for the far-right candidates had increased from 36.8% (first round 2024) to 40.96% (first round 2025) and to 46.40% (second round 2025), showing deep divisions within the Romanian society. The comparison between the support for Simion in the first round 2024 and the second round 2025 shows that locality level determinants of voting for Simion are consistent between the two rounds of elections. The support was higher in localities with a low ethnic diversity, rural, with a younger population, and less developed (see **Figure 5**). Individual level data also shows that Simion's support was higher among voters who did not complete high school education (see **Figure 4**).

Lastly, the increased turnout in the second round compared to the first round 2025 reveals the mobilization of over one million additional voters through a grassroots effort to prevent the election of the far-right Simion, more than 60% of which were from the diaspora (see **Table 4**). Diaspora votes were clearly divided geographically between Europe, where majority votes went to Simion and the rest of the world, where majority votes went to Dan, suggesting that local context is important, and the nationalist movement growing across Europe embraces a distinct anti-European character.

The new prime minister and his pro-European governing coalition face tremendous obstacles. Mostly, they need to bridge the social divisions manifest in the 2024 crisis. They also need to rebuild trust in institutions, eroded not only by the external interference in elections, but by years of corruption and neglect. Improving the

standard of living and navigating the worsening security crisis should be their other priorities. To achieve these goals, the coalition must maintain its cohesion, send a unified message, and advance with a clear plan of action.

Author details

Oana I. Armeanu
University of Southern Indiana, USA

*Address all correspondence to: oiarmeanu@usi.edu

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Chapter 5

From Populism to Illiberalism: How Central and Eastern European Countries Fell into the Illiberal Trap

Andrei Țăranu and Cristian Pîrvulescu

Abstract

This chapter explores the transformation of populist movements into illiberal regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Focusing on Hungary and Poland, it tracks how elected leaders have used democratic legitimacy to erode liberal institutions and reconfigure democratic norms in exclusivist terms. While parallels exist with the American Make America Great Again movement and global right-wing populism, the chapter argues that the illiberal turn in the region is rooted in local histories and postcommunist vulnerabilities. Through institutional engineering, religious identity politics, and media capture, these regimes have normalized a new form of majoritarian governance that calls into question both the national democratic culture and the EU's normative framework.

Keywords: populism, illiberalism, central and eastern Europe, democratic backsliding, institutional erosion, Hungary, Poland

1. Introduction

The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was initially interpreted as the beginning of an irreversible transition toward liberal democracy. In the logic of the “third wave of democratization” [1], the new regimes were perceived as part of a global historical movement to expand pluralistic institutions and the market economy. Rapid integration into NATO and the European Union, which took place between 1999 and 2007, seemed to confirm the “external conditionality” hypothesis [2], according to which geopolitical anchoring and Western institutional support would be sufficient for democratic consolidation.

However, the optimism of the early 2000s has been contradicted by reality. By the beginning of the 2010s, clear signs of democratic backsliding had emerged: The erosion of the rule of law, the politicization of independent institutions, the capture of the media landscape, and the consolidation of the executive at the expense of checks and balances. These transformations have been conceptualized by comparative literature as forms of *competitive authoritarianism* [3] or *electoral autocratization* [4], in which the formal architecture of democracy is preserved, but its liberal norms are hollowed out.

This chapter analyzes how populism in CEE transformed into illiberalism. Populism, defined by Cas Mudde [5] and Ben Stanley [6] as a “thin ideology” based on the moralized opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites,” initially functioned as a discourse of contestation of the postcommunist order and further elaborated by Pappas as a paradoxical form within liberal democracy [7], or by Urbinati as a transformation of democratic legitimacy into populist sovereignty [8]. However, once institutionalized, it became the foundation of a new logic of governance—illiberal democracy [9]. This does not abolish democracy but reinterprets it in majoritarian and exclusivist terms, justifying the centralization of power and the limitation of pluralism.

Although there are analogies with other political spaces—Fareed Zakaria [10] warned about the “rise of illiberal democracies,” and the Russian case of *sovereign democracy* [11] became an alternative discursive model—the CEE trajectory has specific roots. It reflects the path dependencies of the postcommunist transition: Institutional fragility, unstable party systems, endemic corruption, and the central role of religion in defining national identities.

The contribution of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, we offer a comparative analysis of the paradigmatic cases (Hungary and Poland), highlighting the mechanisms by which populism transformed into institutionalized illiberalism. On the other hand, we propose a more nuanced interpretation of transnational influences: Not just as simple imitations of Trumpism or the Russian model, but as a *synchronized political grammar* between different spaces, where discursive convergence and mutual validation are more important than the direct import of ideas. The chapter is structured in six sections. After an analysis of the rise of populism in CEE, we examine the transition toward institutional illiberalism, with an emphasis on Hungary and Poland. This is followed by a discussion of transnational influences, an analysis of religious identity politics, and a case study on Romania, from Partidul România Mare (PMR, Great Romania Party) to Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Finally, we evaluate the mechanisms of democratic backsliding and discuss the prospects for democratic renewal in the region and within the European Union.

2. The rise of populism in central and eastern Europe

The central argument of this chapter is that illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is not merely a local deviation or a delayed reaction to Western political currents. Rather, it reflects a profound tension between democratic institutions and the unresolved legacies of the postcommunist transformation. Populist movements in the region have exploited these tensions, building electoral majorities on the basis of nationalist, social-conservative, and anti-elitist discourses.

Once in power, many of these movements and leaders—especially Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland—have systematically undermined democratic checks and balances, transforming their countries into “electoral autocracies.”

This transformation did not occur in isolation. While comparisons with the American Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement or Western “culture wars” are tempting, they risk oversimplifying the endogenous dynamics of illiberalism in CEE. As the academic editor of this volume points out, it is historically inaccurate to suggest that Orbán or Kaczyński were inspired by Donald Trump, whose presidency only began in 2017, years after the “constitutional revolution” of Fidesz in 2010 and

the rise of PiS in 2015. Similarly, the assumption that religious identity politics in CEE were imported from the American left's emphasis on minority rights ignores the long-standing role of religion in shaping national identities in the region.

This chapter, therefore, adopts a more nuanced comparative approach. It recognizes the convergent evolution of illiberal politics on both sides of the Atlantic but emphasizes that the CEE variant emerged from a distinct postcommunist context: Characterized by institutional fragility, weak party systems, persistent inequality, and disillusionment with liberal modernization. This reflects what Rupnik has called the 'democracy fatigue' that enabled populist backlash in the region [12]. The ideological overlaps between CEE illiberalism and global right-wing populism—on topics such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, gender ideology, and national sovereignty—should be understood as synchronizations, not as direct borrowings.

To support this argument, the chapter unfolds in six sections:

- An overview of the rise of populist parties and leaders in CEE after 2000, with a focus on the interaction between economic dislocation and political frustration.
- Analysis of the gradual transition from populist rhetoric to institutional illiberalism, with a focus on the cases of Hungary and Poland.
- An examination of the nature of transnational influences, distinguishing between ideological inspiration and structural convergence.
- A discussion of the role of religion and identity politics in legitimizing illiberal regimes.
- An analysis of the institutional mechanisms of democratic erosion.
- Reflections on the implications of this trajectory for democratic resilience in the region and beyond.

The rise of populism in CEE must be understood in the context of the postcommunist transitions of the 1990s and the disillusionment that followed. While the first years after 1989 were marked by optimism about liberal democracy and market reforms, the results were uneven. Economic difficulties, institutional weakness, and widespread corruption created fertile ground for anti-system movements. Populist leaders positioned themselves as authentic representatives of the "real people" against internal elites and externally imposed models of governance.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* transformed from a liberal youth party into a national-conservative force that exploited the dissatisfaction generated by the global financial crisis and the socialist government's mismanagement. Its victory in 2010 marked the beginning of a new phase of majoritarian politics, anchored in an anti-liberal discourse. In Poland, PiS capitalized on similar feelings, promising national renewal, moral order, and wealth redistribution, culminating in its electoral victory in 2015.

Populism in the region took different forms—civic nationalism, ethnic exclusion, and religious conservatism—depending on the national context. In Slovakia, parties like SMER Socialna Demokracia (Social Democratic Direction), Slovak Social Democratic Party adopted left-wing populist rhetoric, while in Bulgaria, *Ataka* promoted xenophobic and anti-Turkish narratives. Despite these variations, most

populist movements in CEE shared a common core: Hostility to liberal pluralism, skepticism toward international institutions, and a Manichean vision of politics as a struggle between the pure people and the corrupt elites. Comparable trajectories of competitive authoritarianism have been observed in the Western Balkans [13].

The success of populism in CEE is also linked to the weakness of party systems and the personalization of power. In fragile civil societies with a low level of civic trust, many voters were attracted to charismatic leaders who promised to bypass bureaucracy and “get things done.” These dynamics created the conditions for the consolidation of power, which later evolved into illiberalism.

3. From populism to illiberalism

Populism in Central and Eastern Europe did not remain limited to rhetorical appeals or protest movements. In several cases, once in power, populist parties evolved into governing coalitions or dominant parties that reshaped democratic institutions to consolidate their position.

This process of transformation—from populism to illiberalism—was gradual and often legalistic, relying on the language of majoritarian democracy and national sovereignty.

In Hungary, Fidesz used its two-thirds parliamentary majority obtained in 2010 to rewrite the Constitution, limit the powers of the Constitutional Court, and centralize control over the media. This constitutional engineering allowed for the consolidation of a dominant party system under the disguise of legal and electoral legitimacy. In Poland, PiS followed a similar path, undermining the independence of the judiciary system and capturing the public media, constantly invoking the “will of the people.”

The transition to illiberalism was often justified as a correction of the “excesses” of postcommunist liberalism, including what populist leaders presented as the domination of foreign capital, cosmopolitan elites, and unelected and publicly unaccountable judges. Such narratives allowed governments to present the undermining of institutions as a patriotic act of democratic renewal.

Although they preserved the formal architecture of democracy—elections, parliaments, constitutions—illiberal regimes hollowed out liberal norms. The rule of law became selective, checks and balances mechanisms were weakened, and the space for civil society and dissident voices was restricted. The essence of this transformation does not lie in open authoritarianism but in the repurposing of democratic institutions to serve a majoritarian and exclusivist logic, often combining nationalism, traditionalism, and the expansion of executive power.

This drift from populism to illiberalism marks a structural shift in the political order of the region. It shows how democratic backsliding can occur without a formal regime collapse and how the legitimizing force of electoral mandates can be used to dismantle the very foundations of constitutional democracy.

4. Transnational influences: Between inspiration and convergence

Although illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is often interpreted through the lens of internal political developments, its development must also be placed in a transnational context. Populist movements in the region have interacted with broader ideological currents, learning from and aligning with similar actors abroad.

However, these influences had less to do with direct imitation and more with a convergence that could be described as a *synchronized political grammar*, shaped by global discontent—often induced through hybrid warfare or social media—regarding the status quo.

One of the most widespread assumptions is that illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe was inspired by the American MAGA movement. However, this narrative does not withstand a rigorous chronological check. Viktor Orbán's illiberal project began long before Trump's election in 2016, with constitutional changes underway in Hungary since 2010. Similarly, PiS initiated its anti-liberal institutional reforms in 2015, based on a national-conservative vision anchored in Polish history and the moral authority of Catholicism.

However, once Trumpism emerged as a global reference point, there was mutual validation. Orbán was invited as a keynote speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022 and organized a European variant of this event in Budapest in 2022, 2023, and 2024, and PiS leaders expressed their support for the conservative realignments in the USA. These interactions reflect a common opposition to globalism, liberal cosmopolitanism, and supranational governance, rather than a hierarchical flow of ideological influence.

Beyond the USA, other transnational connections have played a certain role. The Russian model of “sovereign democracy,” the role of traditionalist NGOs such as CitizenGo, and the political alliances in the European Parliament from 2019 (*Identity and Democracy and European Conservatives and Reformists*), followed by those in 2024 (*Patriots for Europe, European Conservatives and Reformists, and Europe of Sovereign Nations*), have provided discursive and logistical support. Hungary and Poland have, in turn, become attractive models of illiberal governance for far-right movements across Europe.

The digital ecosystem has amplified these transnational interactions. Social media, encrypted messaging platforms, and YouTube channels have allowed for the rapid spread of ideological narratives—from anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracies to anti-EU rhetoric—bypassing traditional media and regulatory oversight.

The result is not the importation of a foreign model but the formation of a transnational space of illiberal resonance, where actors mutually reinforce their discourses about cultural sovereignty, religious revival, and national self-determination. This global illiberal imaginary allows local leaders to place their authoritarian drift within a broader battle for the “soul of the West.”

5. Religious identity politics: European roots, not imported scenarios

5.1 Religion, nation, and the politics of symbolic boundaries

Religious identity politics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are often explained through the lens of foreign ideological influences—be it American evangelicalism, Russian orthodoxy, or a reaction against Islam—but such interpretations overlook the profound European genealogy of religious nationalism.

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Churches served as engines of national consolidation, especially in multiethnic empires such as Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Tsarist Russia. These institutions became part of what Pierre Bourdieu called the field of power, providing symbolic capital to nationalist movements by claiming cultural authenticity and moral authority [14].

After 1989, the postcommunist relaunch of national sovereignty provided fertile ground for the reactivation of these symbolic systems. Religion re-entered the public sphere not primarily as a form of spiritual revival but as an instrument of post-secular governance [15], defining who belongs to the community and under what cultural conditions.

5.2 Comparative overview of religious identity politics

This comparative perspective shows both the diversity and convergence of politico-religious arrangements in the region. Although the theological content is often minimal, the symbolic function of religion as an identity marker is central (**Table 1**).

5.3 Poland: Ethno-Catholicism and the hegemony of moral order

Poland offers perhaps the clearest example of religion functioning as a hegemonic identity regime. The narrative of Polak-katolik (Polish = Catholic) precedes communism and has survived the pressures of secularization in the twentieth century.

Since PiS's electoral victory in 2015, Catholicism has been elevated from the status of a cultural tradition to that of a normative architecture. The Church exercises considerable influence over legislation on abortion, sexuality, and education [16, 17].

Country	Dominant religion	Political role of religion	Main political actors	Major conflicts	Transnational links
Poland	Catholicism	Ethno-nationalist hegemony	PiS, Catholic Church	LGBTQ+ rights, abortion	Global conservative Catholic networks
Hungary	Catholicism, Calvinism	Civilizational Christianity	Fidesz, state–Church alliance	Migration, gender, and EU norms	Alignment with Poland, Serbia
Romania	Orthodox Christianity	Moral populism, Orthodox nationalism	ROC (Orthodox Church), nationalist parties	LGBTQ+ rights, religious education	Pan-Orthodox diplomacy, tensions with the Russian Church
Croatia	Catholicism	Mnemonic nationalism, anti-gender	HDZ, Catholic Church	Gender ideology, war memory	Connections with Ordo Iuris, CitizenGo
Slovakia	Catholicism	Conservative bioethics, selective secularism	OLaNO, KDH	Reproductive rights	Occasional links with Polish pro-life networks
Czechia	Mostly secular	Symbolic invocation of Christianity	SPD, far-right actors	Anti-Islam, EU skepticism	Growing European identitarianism
Slovenia	Catholicism	Fluctuating influence, conservative activism	SDS, Church-affiliated NGOs	Education, gender issues	Coordination with Croatian and Italian movements

Table 1.
Comparative overview of religious identity politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

This identity configuration exerts what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence—the imposition of a dominant cultural framework that seems natural or neutral, but which structurally excludes dissenting or nonnormative identities. Such mechanisms also resonate with Bourdieu and Passeron’s analysis of cultural reproduction in education and society [18]. The PiS–Church alliance normalized homophobic discourse and introduced “LGBT-free zones,” effectively sacralizing the boundaries of national belonging [19].

5.4 Hungary: Post-secular authoritarianism and civilizational Christianity

Hungary under Viktor Orbán offers a paradigmatic case of civilizational Christianity as an instrument of illiberal governance. Since 2010, the Fidesz government has promoted the narrative of an “illiberal democracy” [9], in which Christianity functions not as a personal faith but as a collective identity wall against Western decadence, multiculturalism, and migration [20].

The Hungarian Constitution of 2011 opens with a reference to the “role of Christianity in preserving the nation,” institutionalizing religious identity in the very grammar of the constitutional order. State subsidies for Catholic and Protestant denominations have increased significantly, and the Churches are encouraged to support government narratives about family, migration, and gender [21].

This framework produces what Bhambra [22] would call normative hybridity: Religion is not autonomous but intertwined with authoritarian populism, resulting in a “Christian democracy” that excludes Muslims, Roma, LGBTQ+ people, and left-wing intellectuals.

5.5 Romania: Orthodox conservatism and the re-nationalization of morality

In Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) emerged from communism with increased symbolic legitimacy, presenting itself both as a victim and as a spiritual savior of the nation. Post-1989 governments have cultivated a tacit concordat with the Church, offering it access to public funds, education, and media in exchange for moral support in electoral campaigns and referenda [23].

The 2018 referendum to constitutionally define marriage only as a union “between a man and a woman”—although invalidated due to low turnout—showed the capacity of BOR and its affiliated NGOs (such as the Coalition for Family) to mobilize on identity issues [24]. This moral populism relies on anxieties about “EU-imposed liberalism,” using religious rhetoric to defend the “natural order” and “Romanian values.”

The proximity of BOR to nationalist actors fuels a discourse of Orthodox exceptionalism, presenting Romania as a “spiritual fortress” in a decadent European context, using rhetoric that resonates throughout the Balkan and post-Soviet space [25].

5.6 Croatia: Religion, war memory, and biopolitical governance

In Croatia, Catholicism has been a central component of national identity since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The post-independence period saw the rise of the Catholic Church as both a moral authority and a mnemonic actor, influencing the historical memory of the “Homeland War” and the Ustasha legacy [26].

School textbooks, official holidays, and Church sermons often reproduce a moralized nationalist history, legitimizing ethnic exclusion through sacralized narratives [27].

The Church also plays an active role in establishing biopolitical norms, especially concerning family, gender, and reproduction. Campaigns against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention were presented as battles against “gender ideology” and “anti-Christian Europe,” using tactics like those in Poland and Hungary [28].

5.7 Religion as an indigenous political resource, not as an imported ideology

The re-politicization of religion in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be understood solely as an effect of external influences—be they Russian or American. Rather, it reflects a structural return to indigenous traditions of moral sovereignty, rooted in the nineteenth century, when the Churches became central actors in building nations. From Catholic Poland to Orthodox Romania or post-Yugoslav Croatia, the alliance between religion and collective identity has provided a symbolic vocabulary that survived both communism and the post-1989 transition.

This genealogy shows that religious identity politics are not recent “imports” but indigenous resources for political legitimization. In Poland, ethno-Catholicism provided the moral hegemony necessary for the PiS project; in Hungary, civilizational Christianity became the foundation of Orbán’s “illiberal democracy;” in Romania, BOR played the role of a moral arbiter and a vector of identity mobilization in campaigns such as the 2018 family referendum. These examples indicate a historical continuity, not an ideological transplant.

Functionally, religious identity politics act as cultural technologies of exclusion. Using moral vocabulary – “natural order,” “Christian values,” “protecting the family”—illiberal regimes draw boundaries between “real citizens” and “the others”: Sexual minorities, marginalized ethnic groups, secular dissidents. In this sense, religion is not just a belief but a tool for defining the political community, operating what Pierre Bourdieu [14] would call symbolic violence: the naturalization of a cultural order that excludes difference. This dynamic can be better understood through Casanova’s notion of ‘public religions in the modern world’ [29].

At the same time, these dynamics highlight the unresolved tensions between European secular modernity and the symbolic sovereignty of CEE nations. On the one hand, there is the normative pressure of the European Union to respect pluralism, minority rights, and secular neutrality; on the other, there is the appeal to religious traditions as a source of political and moral legitimacy. The result is post-secular governance [15], in which religion does not return as pure faith but as a marker of political belonging.

Thus, religious identity politics in CEE must be recognized as indigenous manifestations of the historical alliance between Church, nation, and identity, but reinterpreted in the current context of populism and illiberalism. They function as bridges between the national past and the political present, between memory and strategy, between the symbolic and the institutional. Understanding these dynamics, therefore, requires not only comparative political analysis but also a critical reflection on Europe’s religious legacies and how they shape the democratic future of the region.

6. The case of Romania: From PRM to AUR: Reconfigured national-communism

The trajectory of far-right populism in Romania reflects both continuities with the interwar and postcommunist nationalist tradition and specific institutional dynamics of democratic consolidation after 1989. Unlike its neighbors in Central

Europe, Romania did not experience an early transition to illiberalism. For more than a decade, mainstream parties avoided openly embracing nationalist extremism, and Romania seemed an exception in the regional populist wave.

This perception changed radically with the entry into Parliament in 2020 of *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* (AUR), a radical nationalist party with clear illiberal and identitarian tendencies.

6.1 The legacy of national-communism and post-1989 hybrid politics

The revival of the far-right in Romania cannot be understood without addressing the legacy of National-Communism—a mixture of Ceaușescu's state-autarchic ideology and nationalist exceptionalism. Unlike Hungary or Poland, where communism was heavily supervised by Moscow, Romania enjoyed relative autonomy after 1958, which allowed the regime to instrumentalize nationalism as a central pillar of legitimacy.

This National-Communist matrix shaped public discourse and prepared the ground for political actors to reactivate the rhetoric of Romanian moral superiority, cultural purity, and geopolitical victimization after 1989.

The Greater Romania Party (PRM), founded by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, embodied this continuity. Combining Orthodox traditionalism, anti-Semitism, and authoritarian nostalgia, PRM reached its peak in 2000, when its presidential candidate obtained over 28% of the vote. However, Romania's integration into NATO (2004) and the EU (2007) gradually marginalized explicit extremist narratives, and PRM disappeared from the political forefront.

6.2 The emergence of AUR: Religion, resentment, and digital radicalism

The rise of AUR in 2020 marked a new phase of Romanian illiberalism. Initially formed by the convergence of two ultra-conservative groups—one focused on religious traditionalism (related to the 2018 family referendum) and the other on unionist nationalism (promoting the union with the Republic of Moldova)—AUR capitalized on the dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The party presented these measures as attacks on religious freedom and national identity, mobilizing especially through Orthodox networks and social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok.

What differentiated AUR from previous far-right formations was its hybrid ideological construction: A mixture of Orthodox fundamentalism, anti-globalism, pandemic libertarianism, and moderate historical revisionism. It presented itself both as a defender of faith and the nation and as a representative of the “common man” against a corrupt and Westernized elite.

This flexibility allowed it to build alliances with a part of the diaspora and gain significant online traction without mainstream media exposure.

6.3 From radicalization to strategic moderation and back

Once in Parliament, AUR went through a period of internal fragmentation. The exclusion of Diana Șoșoacă and other radical voices in 2021 marked an attempt at strategic moderation, aimed at improving the party's international image and facilitating dialog with actors such as Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* or PiS in Poland.

However, this change came at the cost of alienating its radical core. In the 2024 presidential elections, leader George Simion failed to enter the second round,

being eclipsed by more extreme candidates, such as Șoșoacă herself. The balance between electoral normalization and movement radicalism continues to define AUR's trajectory. Although it tempered its Euroscepticism and adopted a more refined communication style after 2022, the party later returned to harsh nationalist rhetoric, aligning with the broader trends of cultural protectionism and Christian traditionalism in CEE.

6.4 A Romanian model of illiberalism?

AUR does not represent just the revival of nationalist populism but also the continuation of an illiberal line already experienced in Romania, from the attempts of the Partidul Social Democrat (Social Democratic Party of Romania) under Liviu Dragnea (2017–2019) to the compromises made by mainstream parties in the face of religious and conservative pressures. The controversial changes to the justice laws and the attacks on the rule of law during the Dragnea period were only a visible episode of a deeper temptation that crosses the entire political spectrum.

This tendency is clearly seen in the broad agreement in 2015 between the main parliamentary parties and the *Coalition for Family* to support the constitutional amendment for the restrictive definition of marriage. It is also found in the 2019 law banning gender education, adopted with the almost unanimous support of the political class (except for Uniunea Salvați România (Save Romania Union, USR)) and finally rejected by the Constitutional Court. And this recurrent tendency returns today in the ambiguities of President Nicușor Dan toward the law on combating extremism, where a rhetoric of “prudence” hides the risk of relativizing historical memory and tolerating radical discourses.

AUR capitalizes on these breaches, but it is not the only vector of Romanian illiberalism. In parallel, there is also a *technocratic illiberalism* practiced at the local level, exemplified by Ilie Bolojan, where austerity and the reduction of public participation are justified by economic and managerial arguments. However, under this facade of efficiency hides a deeply anti-deliberative vision that subordinates local democracy to a logic of “firm decision,” of authoritarian inspiration.

Therefore, the illiberal temptation in Romania is not the monopoly of AUR but crosses the entire political scene: From the drifts of the PSD in the Dragnea era, to the compromises of mainstream parties with the conservative agenda, to the ambiguities of President Dan and the austerity of the Bolojan government. The Romanian particularity lies not in a consolidated illiberal regime, but in a recurrent and polymorphous illiberalism that appears cyclically, in different forms, but with the same effect: the erosion of pluralism, the restriction of civic space, and the redefinition of democracy as exclusivist and managerial governance.

7. The mechanisms of democratic backsliding

The erosion of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe did not occur through sudden regime changes or coups, but through gradual legal and institutional reforms that shifted the balance of power in favor of the governing parties. These reforms were often presented as corrective measures—meant to restore justice, fight corruption, or protect national sovereignty—but, in practice, they weakened institutional autonomy, pluralism, and the rule of law.

Below are the main mechanisms used by illiberal regimes to consolidate their power under a democratic facade.

7.1 Politicization of the judiciary

In Hungary and Poland, the judiciary was an early target of illiberal consolidation. In Hungary, Fidesz lowered the mandatory retirement age for judges, which allowed for the replacement of experienced ones with political loyalists. The power of the Constitutional Court was limited, and appointments were centralized.

In Poland, PiS restructured the National Council of the Judiciary and the Supreme Court, allowing for political intervention in appointments and disciplinary procedures. These actions compromised the principle of judicial independence—the cornerstone of constitutional democracy.

7.2 Manipulation of the electoral system

Another key mechanism is the modification of electoral rules to favor the incumbent. In Hungary, Fidesz redrew constituencies (gerrymandering), introduced a “winner takes more” system, and reduced the number of parliamentarians—all with the effect of maximizing control over Parliament, even with less than 50% of the popular vote.

State media massively favored the governing party in campaigns, while opposition parties faced legal and financial constraints.

Although elections continue to take place, the conditions are fundamentally asymmetric. Freedom House downgraded Hungary to “partly free” status [30], and the V-Dem project now classifies it as an “electoral autocracy” [31].

7.3 Capture of the media landscape

Control of information is essential for any regime that wants to consolidate its legitimacy, and the experience of Central and Eastern Europe shows that the erosion of democracy often begins by restructuring the media space. The free press, perceived as an obstacle to the government’s discursive hegemony, has been gradually subordinated through a combination of legal pressures, financial mechanisms, and delegitimization strategies. Illiberal regimes in the region have applied three types of instruments:

- *Institutional capture*, whereby regulatory authorities (audiovisual councils, communication agencies) are populated with political loyalists;
- *Economic capture*, by directing state advertising revenue to friendly institutions and discouraging independent investors;
- *Ownership capture*, by encouraging government-affiliated oligarchs to buy independent publications, turning media pluralism into a facade.

The Polish and Hungarian examples are paradigmatic. In Poland, public television (TVP) was transformed into an electoral propaganda channel for PiS, and campaigns to demonize the opposition or minorities were presented as “objective information.” In Hungary, over 500 media outlets were merged into a single trust (KESMA), controlled by Fidesz affiliates, creating an unprecedented concentration of media

power. Independent voices survive, but they operate under constant pressure—legal, financial, and reputational—and their access to the general public is limited.

In other states in the region, including Romania and Bulgaria, media capture has not occurred through institutional monopoly, but through *a mixture of oligarchizing and tabloidization*. Media owners are often dependent on state contracts, which favor self-censorship and alignment with dominant discourses. In Romania, news television has become the main ground for polarization, with some channels being associated with powerful political or economic groups, and the digital space, which is freer, has been invaded by disinformation campaigns and propaganda networks connected to hybrid warfare.

This capture does not mean the disappearance of the independent press, but a systematic reduction of its social impact. Critical voices remain active online or in specialized niches, but they lose access to the general public and are constantly stigmatized as “foreign agents” or “mercenaries of external interests.” In this way, formal pluralism coexists with discursive hegemony, a paradox that defines the illiberal model: The free press exists, but it is marginalized, delegitimized, and lacks the resources to compete with the government’s media apparatus.

7.4 Delegitimization of dissent

Opposition parties, NGOs, academia, and civil activists have been the target of delegitimization campaigns. They have been labeled as “foreign agents,” “Soros-funded,” or “unpatriotic.”

Laws have been proposed or adopted that regulate the activity of NGOs (following the model of Russian legislation on “foreign agents”), even if some were later overturned by European courts.

This strategy creates a moral division between the “true people”—aligned with the governing party—and a perceived “external enemy” acting against the national interest. The result: The space for democratic deliberation narrows, and repression is justified in the name of protecting sovereignty.

7.5 Institutional redundancy and the rise of executive power

Illiberal regimes maintain the form of liberal institutions—parliaments, courts, ombudsmen—but hollow them out of power through executive dominance. Parliament becomes a “rubber stamp,” constitutional control is reduced to symbolic gestures, and oversight institutions are politicized or underfunded.

This creates a “hyper-executive” state where decisions are concentrated in the hands of the party leader or a small circle, with a minimal level of public accountability.

8. The future of democracy in central and Eastern Europe

The illiberal turn in Central and Eastern Europe represents one of the most profound political transformations of the post-1989 era. Far from being a temporary deviation or a purely reactionary response, it has reconfigured the terms of democratic legitimacy, replacing pluralistic and liberal conceptions of democracy with majoritarian, identitarian, and sovereigntist logics of governance.

By tracing the trajectory from populist insurgency to institutional illiberalism, the chapter has shown not only how elected governments can use the rhetoric of popular

sovereignty to gradually dismantle the liberal-democratic framework but also why these processes are difficult to reverse.

Courts are politicized, electoral systems are recalibrated, media landscapes are captured, and dissent is delegitimized—all under the cover of democratic mandates. Illiberalism does not abolish democracy but redefines it in exclusivist and hierarchical terms, privileging “real citizens” at the expense of minorities, civil society, or critical institutions.

However, as argued in sections 4 and 5, this transformation cannot be understood solely through the lens of transnational imitation. Even if illiberal regimes in CEE share affinities with global right-wing populism—including MAGA-style nationalism, religious revival, and anti-globalist rhetoric—their roots lie in internal historical experiences, postcommunist trajectory dependencies, and long-standing anxieties about sovereignty and identity. Overlaps with American or Russian models reflect strategic synchronizations rather than direct ideological imports.

At the same time, the illiberal model has begun to radiate outward, influencing political actors across Europe and beyond. Its relative success in combining electoral legitimacy with authoritarian governance offers an attractive template for politicians seeking to erode liberal constraints without abandoning democratic appearances. This model represents a structural challenge not only to the normative cohesion of the European Union but also to the very grammar of democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

8.1 The chances for democratic renewal

The decisive question for the region is whether and to what extent Central and Eastern European democracies can still be regenerated after a decade of institutional erosion. Although the formal architecture of democracy—elections, constitutions, parliaments—remains standing, the normative foundations have been severely weakened. Legal reforms alone cannot reverse illiberal consolidation, because what has been lost is not just a set of rules but the collective trust in their legitimacy.

Democratic renewal requires, first and foremost, a reconstruction of political culture. In a context where populism and identity politics have delegitimized pluralism, there is a need to recover the values of dialog and compromise. This cannot be done only through political elites, but through a reconnection of institutions with citizens and through a renewed civic education, capable of counteracting authoritarian and conspiratorial narratives.

Secondly, renewal depends on the revitalization of civil society and the independent media space. NGOs, civic movements, and independent journalists remain the main actors capable of resisting illiberal trends. But without financial support and legal protection, these initiatives risk being marginalized. Paradoxically, it is civil society—which pushed for democratic transition in the 1990s—that has become the favorite target of populist regimes, being stigmatized as “foreign agents” or “unpatriotic.”

Finally, any discussion of the chances of democratic renewal is incomplete without the supranational dimension. The European Union remains the main normative and institutional framework for protection, but its conditionality mechanisms have often proven insufficient or delayed. The case of Hungary showed the limits of Article 7 procedures, while Poland demonstrated that financial sanctions could have only a partial effect. However, new instruments—such as the conditionality of European funds on the observance of the rule of law—offer a more robust framework. Democratic renewal in CEE depends on the EU’s ability to combine external pressure with positive support for internal reformers.

Thus, the chances for democratic renewal are not reduced to a simple institutional “reset.” They involve a profound cultural and societal reconstruction, anchored in civic education and the consolidation of pluralism, supplemented by effective European conditionality mechanisms. If these three levels—internal, societal, and supranational—manage to articulate, democracy in the region can regain its resilience. Otherwise, illiberalism risks becoming not just a temporary deviation but a normal form of Central and Eastern European politics.

8.2 The fundamental lesson of the transition from populism to illiberalism

The CEE experience reminds us that democracy is not self-sustaining. It must be institutionalized, defended, and continuously reimagined, especially in contexts where the traumas of transition, inequality, and geopolitical insecurity remain active.

Populism will continue to be a force in the region—as in other parts of the world—but its trajectory does not have to inevitably lead to illiberalism. The challenge lies in articulating a democratic populism, based on inclusion, transparency, and social justice, capable of regaining popular energy without sacrificing the fundamental principles of democracy.

The trajectory of Central and Eastern Europe shows that illiberalism is not reduced to a temporary deviation from democracy, but to a systematic process of redefining political legitimacy. Populism has provided the Manichean language, and anti-gender policies have offered the cultural mobilization tool by which majorities can imagine themselves as victims of an imposed modernity. In Poland, Hungary, and Romania, this strategy has consolidated dominant parties, restricted pluralism, and created new forms of symbolic exclusion. In this sense, what seemed like a moral dispute over gender has transformed into a central vector of illiberalism, confirming recent observations that anti-gender policies are more than a simple “backlash”: They are a laboratory for reshaping democratic regimes into authoritarian forms [24]. Ignoring these developments means accepting the normalization of a hollowed out democracy—a showcase democracy, where slogans like “Down with the Government!” become a symptom of an increasingly polarized and delegitimized public space.

Author details

Andrei Țăranu* and Cristian Pîrvulescu
Faculty of Political Sciences, National School on Political Studies and Public
Administration, Bucharest, Romania

*Address all correspondence to: ataranu@gmail.com

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Section 3

Populism and the Renewal of Democracy: Theoretical and Normative Perspectives

Chapter 6

Perspective Chapter: Populism and Democracy – Corruption as an Enemy

Maria Luisa Nabinger de Almeida

Abstract

This essay explores the meanders of the formation of populism in Latin America, mainly Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina in the 1950s. Through “regulated citizenship,” where unions and workers’ professions were controlled by Vargas’s state—while in the Argentine context, it was the nationalist-based Democratic Union, the Armed Forces, and the Church that encouraged Peronist Justicialism—this work questions: Would the masses under domination be the enemies of representative democracy itself? Currently, in the countries studied, the leaders Javier Milei and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva continue the practice of populism through new resources such as semiotics, unions, and public policies, but also under the practice of corruption.

Keywords: democracies in Latin America, populist or populism, the cases of Brazil and Argentina, Getúlio Vargas and Juan Domingo Perón, respectively, in the 1950s, and currently Javier Milei and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, democracy, sovereignty and corruption

1. Introduction

Populism has always been the recurring *leitmotif* of political crises. The relationship between social actors changes according to their current interests. In Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Argentina, this phenomenon manifests itself during dictatorship but also in democracy. It is convenient, however, to describe the geometry established by the tripod of parliament, party systems, and electoral systems under the rule of law. If representative democracy holds political decision-making power, one can question the genesis of populism or its correlate within the correlation of forces. Trivializing conflicts in a democracy that seeks a state of grace does not eliminate the existence of a “border” between “us” and “them,” as Chantal Mouffe pointed out ([1], p. 11).¹ On the contrary, there is a link between “us” and the “people.”

¹ In the Preface *Por Um Populismo de Esquerda*, Jean Tible critical terms of the author’s “antagonism as a rule”: “The confrontation resurface as an enemy in religious, ethnic or moral terms”... In: For a left-wing populism. São Paulo, SP: Autonomia Literária, 2019 ([1], p. 11).

For Mouffe, the conflict lies not within liberal democracy itself but within right-wing populism or the “them.” These conflicts have been evident since the birth of the modern nation-state when national representation already presented the ambiguities of “us”—the nationals—and “them”—the foreigners.

For Carl Schmitt the issue was with parliamentary representation being translated merely into the number of votes, as analyzed in *Legality and Legitimacy* (1932): “[The] analysis of the paradoxes of parliamentary democracy and its tendency to replace political decision-making with the exclusive quantitative majority of votes.” ([2], p. 11).

In both the Westminster and Consensual Democracy models of representative democracy, governance should be by the people. However, in the first type, it is “always in perfect correspondence with the preferences of all citizens,” and therefore, the majority. In the second type, governance is conducted by the majority with the minority as opposition ([3], p. 32).

What, then, to think of a representative liberal democracy that, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, maintains unequal relations, with a rigid social division of labor and property? ([3], p. 17).

On the other hand, Popular Democracy was gradually intuited, first by Rousseau himself and then by Marx in *The Civil War in France*. There, the Commune was described as “not a parliamentary body, but an acting body, executive and legislative at the same time,” in addition to having its delegates dismissed at any time by the voters ([3], p. 258).

Likewise, Lenin does not hide in *The State and the Revolution*—particularly in the chapter on the abolition of parliamentarism—that, influenced by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* ([4], p. 258), he seeks an alternative to bourgeois democracy. Hans Kelsen, in *General Theory of Law and the State* (1952), sees the parliamentary regime as one where “the function of government passes from citizens organized in popular assemblies to special bodies” ([3], p. 258). He also observes that we are dealing with “a significant attenuation of the principle of political self-determination,” and that “it is characteristic of so-called indirect or representative democracy” to conclude that “there is no doubt (...) that none of the existing democracies called ‘representative’ can be considered as such” ([3], p. 258).

It is worth highlighting the importance Lenin gave to the people as “master of parliament,” that is, the suppression of parliament itself. Based on the analysis of the Soviets since the 1905 Revolution, Lenin, in *State and Revolution* “(see in particular the chapter on *the abolition of parliamentarism*)” ([3], p. 258) points to an alternative to bourgeois democracy—or the anti-democracy of parliament:

The abolition of parliament, its replacement by representative bodies of the “Soviet” or “council” type (...) for “the replacement of one type of institution by another fundamentally different one” would be imperative ([3], p. 309).

2. The populism under challenges

In Latin America, in the countries we studied, we have always experienced a crisis of representation, rather than the creation of new forms leading to parliamentary politics.

Historically, according to Roberto Schwarz in *Ideas Out of Place* ([5], pp. 59-83; [6]), in Brazil there were three classes: the landowner, the slave, and the “free man.” The latter had access to goods and social life thanks to the favor of a great man. The former was called “the householder” ([7], p. 64). “The favor is our almost universal

mediation” ([5], p. 64) (emphasis in the original). How can liberalism give life to democracy? According to Schwarz, free will is legitimized by some “rational” reason.

Thus, when from 1930 onward the Brazilian State took upon itself the policy of social order through legislation—more as a conciliatory effort between capital and labor than as the promotion of people’s representative participation in political life—it tried to create social control with the so-called “regulated citizenship,” according to Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos ([8], 92 p), during the Vargas era.

The conflicts inherent to representative democracy were eliminated by a supposed “social peace,” whose link between “us” and “them” suppressed the sovereignty of the people. Due to the condescension of the actors within the universal and representative system, the democratic process stagnated for decades, even enabling a civil-military coup in 1964. Until the eve of that coup d’état, the trade union organizations—whose professions were recognized by the Vargas State—did not promote any political recognition of “outlaw” workers.

The Manichaeism observed not only in concepts but also in political practices—as in the case of professions and unions manipulated during the Vargas era in the 1950s—makes us believe in one of the variants of populism. When the people are equally deprived of their sovereignty, the usurper becomes a populist trying to reveal the Freudian figure used by Ernesto Laclau as the “ideal Ego” ([9], p. 2). If “populism is generally a political pathology that strikes ignorant masses, victims of demagogues” ([9], p. 1), it is nevertheless an incomprehensible concept because the problem of representation implies that the construction of the “people” would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation ([10], p. 161). In short: parliamentary life, political parties, elections, and, mainly, the trade union movement.

In fact, in the second Vargas government (1951–1954), there was success in recreating the tripod of representative democracy: the political parties—such as União Democrática Nacional (UDN)/National Democratic Union, Partido Social Democrático (PSD)/Social Democratic Party, Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB)/Brazilian Labor Party—and the revival of the electorate alongside state-recognized unions created the possibility of forming a homogeneous identity of the “people,” which Ernesto Laclau referred to as the “emergence of a ‘people’” ([10], p. 200). Thus, the strike of three hundred thousand in São Paulo, in 1953, represented a mass union movement together with factory committees or “Salary Commissions” ([11], pp. 241-244).

Vargas’s populism, strongly nationalist in nature, faced external opposition from the United States, which saw this government as a threat to the establishment of a “Syndicalist Republic,” under the lens of the Truman Doctrine on one side, and the reactions of anti-communist political forces—such as PSD and UDN—on the other

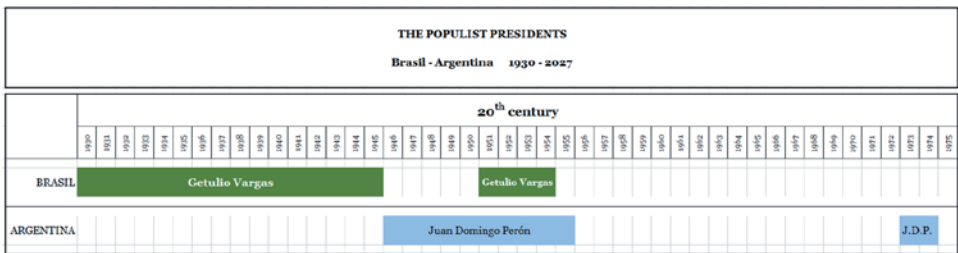


Figure 1.
 MLNA. Populism and Democracy: Corruption as an enemy at twentieth century.

hand ([12], pp. 245-257), in addition to the conspiracy starting in 1953 involving military officers with the ranks of major and lieutenant colonel, culminating in the suicide ([13], pp.43-69) of Getúlio Vargas in 1954 (**Figure 1**).

From then on, coercion in Brazil to maintain the tripartite institutions of representative democracy failed.

3. The downfall of popular achievements

Following the example of T. H. Marshall's ([14], 101 p) analysis of the constitutive process of representative democracy in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we observe that in Latin America, the colonialist domains of the Iberian Peninsula prevented the construction of legitimacy for the modern state, where neither citizenship nor civil society was formed to confer legitimacy on democratic institutions. The numerous alternations between the liberal governments and dictatorships led to the absence of:

1. the conquest of civil rights,
2. political rights, and
3. social rights ([14], p. 24).

After the collapse of the fragile “Ideal Ego” formed during the second government of Getúlio Vargas—mainly by unions and the PDT—we can ask ourselves: what happened to “the denigration of the masses”? ([15], pp. 1-64). In fact, Laclau was extremely cautious when he pointed out the fragility of the concept of populism. In addition to being vague and ambiguous, he revealed the difficulty that political theory has with the right/left dichotomy: “It is a multiclass movement, although not all multiclass movements may be considered populist” ([16], p. 88).

It is through observation—empirically—that we can grasp the populist and nationalist character of the second government of Getúlio Vargas. Gradually, from the 1940s onward, the legitimacy of the dictatorship of the *New State* (*Estado Novo*) (1937–1945) was achieved through labor laws. Thus, populism usually includes contrasting components such as a claim for equality of political rights and universal participation for the common people, but fused with some sort of authoritarianism, often under charismatic leadership.

The laws regulating Labor Justice, the Union Law (1939)—when unions began to submit to the State—the Minimum Wage Law (1940), the Union Tax Law (1942), and the Consolidation of Labor Laws—*CLT* (1943) allowed, at the same time, the subordination of the worker to the State. However, the State also became nationalist, masking the struggle between capital and labor. Was there the formation of a collective? At least Vargas's populism did not prevent a certain political construction through the creation of the “people” ([1], p. 1). In the worst-case context, individuals are the *Real* of the *populus* ([17], p. 6).

All these laws remained in force until the 2000s, in a different political situation, but one no less contradictory—with the absence of the sovereignty of the “people” and national populist leadership represented on one side by the Social Liberal Party (PSL) with Jair Messias Bolsonaro, and on the other by the Workers' Party with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

At this time, these new populisms in Brazil—including billion-dollar corruption at the *National Social Security Institute (Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social-INSS)* investigated by the Federal Police—have completely demoralized the people, making the construction of political identities unfeasible. This politics builds a “multitude” which, as Laclau—drawing on Freud’s theory of “crowds”—explains, is not “a pathology of political life,” but the *essence* of political life, where fascism embraces all political identities collectively [2, 17].

4. The diplomacy and literature of complaint

Part of the correspondence exchanged by leaders of Argentina and Brazil in the early 1950s reveals regret regarding Getúlio Vargas’s behavior toward members of Juan D. Perón’s government during a visit to the Catete Palace.

It was related to Perón’s interest in forming a bloc with Brazil against the United States. Through words full of diplomatic turns and insinuations involving Brazilian diplomatic, governmental, and press officials in intrigues and complaints, the correspondence does not hide General Perón’s dissatisfaction at not being followed by Getúlio Vargas. It should be clarified that since the creation of *National Steel Company (Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional - CSN)*, in 1941, the Brazilian government seemed to have conformed to a policy of alignment with the United States. Thus, Perón’s attempts to entice Getúlio Vargas into forming a bloc south of the Equator proved fruitless ([18], microfilming, roll 17 fot. 0730 a 0742).

The rivalries between historical enemies² also persisted in the formation of grass-roots popular movements. While Getúlio Vargas saw in the operational workforce of CSN the possibility of forming the foundation of modern unions, beyond the dictates of welfare, Juan D. Perón “it began by incorporating rural workers as a strategy to link urban and rural areas ([19], p. 31)”.

Strictly speaking, the context of complaints was not limited to the diplomatic sphere. In politics, we also observe that Latin America is interpreted in the literature with both conflict and omission. Regarding *Varguismo*, some interpretations suggest it did not face great opposition and that its survival in government could be better explained as a specific way of dealing with the constraints of ancient, traditional, and well-positioned state and regional political elites, who claimed to owe themselves to “moral greatness.” That is why, according to Groppo, the real impact of his social reform was not the construction of new political entities, but rather the preservation of the social reform field as a bastion of purely regional and non-nationalizing pressures:

“...did not have great opposition to its leadership, and its survival in government could be explained, in a more certain way, as a particular way of dealing with the prisons of ancient, traditional, and well-positioned state and regional political elites who owed themselves ‘moral greatness’” ([19], p. 31).

How can one ignore the author’s assertions here about Getúlio Vargas’s supposed generosity, his lack of reaction, or his absence of opposition? We shall see. In 1930,

² In the nineteenth Century, 1851–52, in the war between the Brazilian Empire and the Juan Manuel Rosas and Manuel Oribe had the intention to reestablish the Vice-Kingdom of Prata or the country the United Provinces of Rio De La Plata (Buenos Aires).

Getúlio Vargas carried out a coup d'état, undermining not only the existing institutions within the rule of law but also failing to comply with the political agreements made with the regional oligarchies during the First Republic—whether due to Brazil's territorial size or the decentralized structure inherited from the Empire *via* the domination of the National Guard. There were many reactions, the first being the breach of the agreement to appoint a civilian and São Paulo native, Francisco Morato, for the State of São Paulo. In retaliation, Vargas appointed a military officer from State of Pernambuco, João Alberto Lins de Barros (1930–1931), as *interventor*.

However, the so-called Revolution of 1930 “was the victory of the revolution hatched by the Liberal Alliance,” conceived by Francisco Morato, who later became president of the São Paulo Democratic Party in 1926. The party's principles were based on the defense of democratic and liberal values “enshrined in the Constitution,” guaranteeing “the truth of the vote” through mandatory secret ballots and safeguards for registration, scrutiny, counting, and verification, as well as defending agriculture and advocating social measures for “the well-being of the working classes.” ([20], pp. 3-4).

Even though Brazil was experiencing a completely opposite scenario—with, on the one hand, an intention to create a liberal-style representative democracy, and on the other hand, the military forces led by Getúlio Vargas seeking to establish a dictatorship, which occurred in 1937 with the implementation of the *Estado Novo* under a new constitution—Vargas's legalism sought strength in the masses, now based on the national workforce and immigrant labor, especially through quota laws (1930, 1931 and 1938) favoring the Portuguese ([4], pp. 667-672). The focus on the urban environment also displaced political forces that might have attracted popular legitimacy for new power holders ([21], 333 p). The appeal to nationalism even embraced the idea of Brazilianness to justify a “parallel path,” alluding to the *Bandeirantes*, the conquerors of Spanish lands under the Treaty of Tordesilhas in 1494.

In Argentina, Juan D. Perón entered the political scene in 1943, becoming president after defeating the candidate of the Democratic Union and being re-elected in 1951. His support base included workers, nationalists, parts of the Armed Forces, and the Church (Figure 2).

Conversely, both dictators used national unions to mobilize the masses through corporations regulated by the state. Following the example of populist strategies, they also employed propaganda and radio speeches. However, national-populist practices also attracted opposition from elites—such as the Armed Forces and business sectors—in nationalized industries such as oil, public services, gas, water, and electricity.

We can clearly see that, alongside the allure of populism—through control and domination of workers—both *Varguismo* and *Peronismo* manipulated the emotions of

THE POPULIST PRESIDENTS	
Brasil - Argentina 1930 - 2027	
	21 st century (at moment)
	2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025 2026 2027
BRASIL	Luiz Ignacio "Luiz" da Silva J.M. Bolsonaro L.L.L.da Silva
ARGENTINA	Javier G. Milei

Figure 2.
MLNA. Populism and Democracy: Corruption as an enemy at twenty-first century.

the masses, shaping them into an “ideal Ego” that coexisted with a “cult of personality.” This explains Gino Germani’s (1911–1979) ([15], p. 4; [16], p. 88) interpretation of the difference between the populism of Latin American leaders and European fascism: Why did Argentine workers, for example, experience Peronism as if it were a revolution?

“Germani came to rehabilitate what was positive in this historical experience, the objective being, of course, to go beyond it—to ensure that the Argentinian workers use this achievement in the service of another political formation, less suspected of unconditional loyalty to a demagoguery.”³ (Our translation from French).

It is in this sense that Ernesto Laclau rejects the idea of the “denigration of the masses,” since the concept of populism “coincides with politics itself” ([17], p. 1). In our view, the same applies to democracy, which is always evolving according to different processes and contexts.

To highlight the differences between nationalism, populism, and the potential for mass participation in the governments of Vargas and Perón, CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) was established in 1948 in Chile, bringing together some of the best intellectuals from Brazil and Argentina. Henceforth, “no historical synthesis devoted to Latin America in the twentieth century can do without mentioning the ‘populism period’ of Latin American history” ([22], p. 273). (Our translation from French.)⁴

5. The new faces of the populist and representative democracy

Despite deception and manipulation, populism continues to be “one of the most confusing words in the vocabulary of political science,” according to Margaret Canovan ([22], p. 301). Meanwhile, the challenges of populism are currently taking on new forms of domination—but also of destruction—through the new mass media, such as social networks. Furthermore, these forms coexist with unions and public policies. All cultural symbols—such as cinema, theater, music, and much more—are now part of an arsenal, practically a “war against the people,” which eliminates “the illusion of liberal democracy,” according to Carl Schmitt ([24], p. 2).

In the era of radio, even though communications were fragmented in Latin America, both Vargas and Perón took advantage of it to manipulate the masses through radio broadcasts of leaders’ speeches as well as entertainment. Radio survived the military dictatorships and democratization processes in both countries ([3], 261 p) and has now found new tools that no longer aim to unify the masses but rather to instill destruction—evoking Schmitt’s notion of “friend versus enemy.”

Under the guise of representative democracy, with parliaments operating through maneuvers that conceal the interests of large groups and the use of electoral games to simulate a rotation of power, we now see figures like President Javier Milei in

³ Very little is currently studied about the political from that Getúlio Vargas opened with internalization toward the region to the Midwest, as a “human frontier” having even created the new capital of Goiás, Goiânia, in 1933 ([1], 333 p).

⁴ Under the influence of the VII Congress of the III Communist International in 1935 the Communist Parties opted the strategy of political work within the so-called “national unions”, despite the union structure in countries like Portugal and Brazil ([23], pp. 89–101).

Argentina and, more recently, Jair Messias Bolsonaro in Brazil. These leaders have instigated anger and hatred, deeply tearing apart the social fabric. The bad-faith press calls this a “polarized situation,” as if it were a natural phenomenon in a society that produces and manages conflicts within the framework of representative democracy. That is not the case today.

Almost like a “syndrome,” as Peter Wiles describes it, this moment expresses two common traits: “All forms of populism, without exception, notes Margareth Canovan ([22], p. 301) contain a form of exaltation of the ‘people’ and an ‘appeal to the people,’ and are, in one sense or another, anti-elitist” ([22], p. 205). (Our translation from French).

Little by little, in Latin America, we are forming individuals without sovereignty—delegated for decades to authoritarian and fascist leaders—fulfilling the role of the “empty signifier” in Freud’s expression, or even “cults of personality,” which Laclau, in other terms, describes as the supremacy of the signifier ([17], p. 2).

But is it possible to draw this dichotomy when observing the dialectical relationship between the representative and the represented? Are we once again repeating Hegel’s dialectic of the lord and the slave?

Indeed, would the change between the roles of meaning and the signifier not create the link between wrath and hatred, according to Aristotle? ([25], 4 p) From social media, fake news, and the propagation of lies at the expense of truth, the representation and sovereignty of individuals and the collective collapse.

The new populism in Latin America uses unions not only as actors in industrial society but also as agents of national development:

“...it would not be exactly correct to say that unionism is constantly subordinate to political action. Rather, it is accompanied by joint development, laden with tensions, which in many cases leads to the fragmentation of trade union organizations, as in Brazil and Argentina” ([26], p. 317).

In other words, populism tends to perish in the face of representative democracy—or “radical democracy,” according to Laclau ([27], pp. 22-28; [28]). Would this happen because the actors of both populism and democracy are not simultaneously subjects and objects? Or, like a pendulum swinging between the two, how can sovereignty be thought of as a watershed?

In short, let us return to Rousseau, for whom the concept of the Social Contract could be established with the “people,” according to Laclau, and be represented in Parliament. Still, the figure of the sovereign does not need to be a dictator or a populist leader.

6. Conclusion

The passions surrounding populism give rise to numerous definitions of the phenomenon, going beyond the disagreements found in the specialized literature. However, we have explored populist actions in Brazil and Argentina under Getúlio Vargas and Juan D. Perón, respectively, in the twentieth century, when populism appeared almost naïve—since there was, in fact, participation of the masses through the Electoral System, Parliament, and Unions as a form of collective know-how. Paradoxically, practices based on the dominant–dominated dichotomy produced political actions both for and by the subjects themselves.

The turning point occurred during the decades of civil-military dictatorship in Latin America. Through censorship, repression, and torture, these regimes led the democratic process to regress, making necessary certain “leaps” in the achievement of civil, political, and social rights according FH Cardoso ([14], p. 24). The result led to a form of democracy represented by three branches of government but marked by a corrupt state bureaucracy—a compulsion toward destruction, which became the true enemy of both populism and democracy. The vacuum created by the unequal relationship between populism and democracy has altered the dynamics of accountability, both by revealing corruption as a form of political deviation and exposing the masses to populist manipulation.

Author details

Maria Luisa Nabinger de Almeida
Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, BR, Brazil

*Address all correspondence to: luisa.nabinger@gmail.com

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Beyond Populism: A Moral-Existential Theory of Civic Sacredness for Flourishing Democracy

Masaya Kobayashi and Hirotaka Ishikawa

Abstract

This chapter argues that the contemporary crisis of democracy is fundamentally existential rather than primarily ideological or economic. Drawing on Japanese national survey data, the study demonstrates that support for far-right populism is driven less by coherent ideology than by meaning depletion, resentment, and pseudo-religious forms of sacredness organized around purity and hierarchy. By contrast, supporters of centrist democratic parties display higher levels of meaning, hope, spirituality, and fairness-oriented morality, revealing a distinct form of *civic sacredness* grounded in dignity, recognition, and ethical transcendence. To conceptualize this democratic form of sacralization, the chapter introduces the concept of *civic sacredness* and distinguishes it from *authoritarian sacredness*. This distinction also revises Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory by showing that the sanctity foundation conflates two psychologically and normatively different orientations of sacredness. The Japanese evidence, therefore, reveals a previously under-theorized moral-existential cleavage within contemporary democracy. Building on these findings, the chapter develops a *moral-existential theory of democracy* in which civic sacredness functions as the ethical infrastructure of democratic life. It further proposes *Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD)* as the institutional articulation of a flourishing-oriented democratic order grounded in a democratic value ecology—meaning, mattering, recognition, and multi-dimensional well-being. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the future of democracy depends not only on institutional design but also on the cultivation of civic sacredness capable of sustaining a flourishing democracy (*FD*), understood here as an enduring form of *Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (EMDD)*.

Keywords: populism, civic sacredness, existential political psychology, ethical communitarian democracy, flourishing democracy, moral foundations theory

1. Introduction

As populism reveals the erosion of well-being (WB) and values—including meaning—across modern societies, this chapter proposes a path toward democratic

renewal through Ethical Communitarianism. Drawing on Japanese survey evidence, it develops an *Existential Populism Model* that explains how WB and meaning depletion generate resentment, authoritarian sacredness, and populist mobilization, while meaning-rich civic spirituality supports democratic renewal, forming a framework grounded in morality and togetherness that reorient democracy toward shared flourishing.

In the broader framework of this book, this democratic renewal is conceptualized as *Flourishing Democracy*, more precisely an *Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (EMDD)* sustained by multi-dimensional well-being, such as meaning and recognition, and civic spirituality.

2. Religious dimension and hybrid populism/authoritarianism

Building on the comparative analysis developed in Chapter 1 “Populism Typology across Europe, the United States, and Japan” (hereafter the first chapter) and the subsequent empirical investigation of Japanese political psychology in Chapter 2 “Japan’s 2025 Populist Turn from Outside” (hereafter the second chapter), this final chapter places the *religious* and *meaning* dimensions—present implicitly in both earlier chapters—at the center of its normative reconstruction. These dimensions form the conceptual bridge between empirical findings and the book’s overarching goal: to outline a new practice capable of helping democratic societies escape the twin dangers of populism and creeping authoritarianism.

The first chapter analyzed contemporary populism in Europe, the United States, and Japan through a unified lens integrating populist orientation, religious dimensions, and structural position. The comparative findings demonstrate that although all three regions exhibit some form of populism, authoritarian features and consequences vary substantially. The global populist turn is therefore not a uniform phenomenon, but an *asymmetric configuration* shaped by institutional structures, political culture, and religious or cultural narratives.

From this comparative inquiry, two overarching conclusions emerge:

1. Religion, whether cultural, institutional, or symbolic, remains a core resource for political identity and boundary-making.
2. Hybrid authoritarianism—democratic erosion driven jointly by outsider mobilization and insider centralization—is most advanced in the United States, emergent in Japan, and more constrained (though not absent) in Europe.

To clarify these asymmetries, the following sections summarize the religious foundations, hybrid populist mechanisms, and authoritarian trajectories across regions explored in the first chapter.

2.1 Religion as a structuring force across democratic regimes

Across Europe, the United States, and Japan, religion remains pivotal in shaping political mobilization, but the form and function of religion differ significantly across contexts.

- Europe: Religion functions primarily as *cultural-identity religion*—a symbolic resource enabling civilizational narratives, anti-immigration frames, and welfare chauvinism, especially around Islam.
- United States: Religion remains *institutionalized and politically embedded*. Evangelical networks supply elites, resources, mobilization channels, and ideological coherence, providing a robust organizational base for populist and authoritarian appeals.
- Japan: Religion appears largely as *cultural-symbolic Shinto nationalism*. Even amid declining religious organization, Shinto narratives play a major role in shaping political identity and symbols in national destiny narratives.

Taken together, these patterns underscore that religion is not epiphenomenal. It constitutes a structuring axis in the articulation and justification of populist politics across democratic regimes.

2.2 Hybrid populism across democracies: Configurations of democratic competition

Hybrid populism refers to a political configuration in which outsider populist mobilization and insider institutional adaptation interact to reshape democratic competition. While much of the populism literature has focused on ideological definitions or leadership styles (e.g., [1–5]), recent comparative research increasingly emphasizes the interaction between populist mobilization and institutional party competition. In this perspective, populist actors do not remain the permanent outsiders but instead reshape democratic competition through processes of pressure, adaptation, and institutionalization.

As discussed in the first chapter, this dynamic has emerged across several democratic regions. In the United States, hybrid populism has evolved into a durable insider–outsider fusion within the Republican Party, reinforced by religious networks, and partisan media ecosystems. In Japan, hybrid populism appears from the interaction between new outsider parties and insider-driven nationalist rhetoric within the Liberal Democratic Party.

On the other hand, Europe offers especially diverse and analytically instructive configurations of hybridization. Europe, therefore, functions as a comparative laboratory for observing the hybridization of democratic competition.

Figure 1 presents a comparative typology of hybrid populist configurations across Europe.

The figure illustrates four pathways through which hybrid populism reshapes party systems in contemporary European democracies. The configuration depends on outsider access to government and the degree of strategic adaptation by mainstream parties, generating four outcomes: agenda-setting pressure, mutual hybridization, outsider institutionalization, and insider transformation.

In the Italian case, the Five Star Movement illustrates the outsider institutionalization, although mainstream parties also partially adapted through coalition formation. In France, although the Rassemblement National has not yet entered government, its growing electoral strength has induced significant strategic adaptation by mainstream actors, particularly under Macron's presidency.

Outsider Electoral Breakthrough	Mainstream Party Strategic Adaptation	
	Low	High
	Germany Agenda-Setting Pressure AfD agenda influence	France Mutual Hybridization RN pressure + Macron adaptation
High	Italy Outsider Institutionalization M5S in government	United Kingdom Insider Transformation Brexit → Conservative shift

Figure 1.

Party-system pathways of hybrid populism and mainstream party adaptation in contemporary European democracies.

2.2.1 Italy: Institutionalization of hybrid populism

Italy provides the clearest European example of hybrid populism evolving into institutionalized governance through three phases. The rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) in the 2013 and 2018 elections destabilized Italy's traditional party system through strong anti-elite mobilization and outsider protest (Disruption Phase).

Subsequent coalition governments brought outsider actors into institutional politics, thereby producing a hybrid phase in which populist narratives interacted with mainstream party competition (Hybridization Phase).

This trajectory culminated in the government led by Giorgia Meloni and the Brothers of Italy (FdI), where a party with roots in radical right and post-fascist traditions moved from outsider opposition to governing leadership while retaining elements of populist rhetoric centered on national identity, sovereignty, and anti-elite critique (Institutionalization Phase).

Figure 2 summarizes this evolution as a three-stage process of disruption, hybridization, and institutionalization.

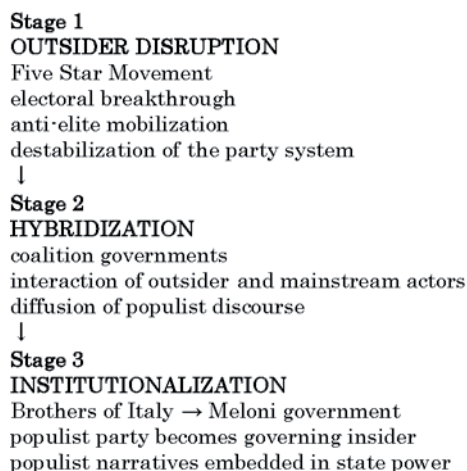


Figure 2.

Institutionalization of hybrid populism in Italy.

The figure illustrates the three-stage transformation: disruption, hybridization, and institutionalization.

2.2.2 France: Mutual hybridization by outsider strength and insider adaptation

France illustrates a different configuration of hybrid populist dynamics within the governing elite. The Rassemblement National (RN), led by Marine Le Pen, has emerged as a major electoral challenger while remaining outside executive power. At the same time, elements of populist rhetoric—particularly appeal to national sovereignty, anti-elite sentiment, and criticism of globalization—have increasingly entered mainstream political discourse. Under Emmanuel Macron, insider governance has occasionally adopted elements of anti-establishment positioning, blurring the boundary between technocratic leadership and outsider critique. Mutual hybridization, therefore, occurs through agenda-setting influence and rhetorical adaptation rather than direct populist governance.

2.2.3 Germany: Hybridization through agenda-setting pressure

Germany represents a distinct form of hybrid populist dynamics characterized by strong outsider pressure without direct institutional inclusion. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has emerged as a significant electoral force, particularly in eastern regions, while remaining excluded from federal governing coalitions. Despite this exclusion, the rise of the AfD has reshaped political competition by exerting agenda-setting pressure on mainstream parties. Debates over migration, border control, and national identity increasingly influence policy positions within major parties, especially the CDU/CSU. Hybridization thus occurs primarily through the diffusion of populist themes into mainstream political discourse.

2.2.4 United Kingdom: Insider transformation after outsider disruption

The United Kingdom illustrates a form of hybrid populist dynamics shaped by the disruptive impact of outsider movements during the Brexit era. Parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and later the Brexit Party mobilized strong anti-establishment and sovereignty-centered narratives that challenged the existing party system. Although these outsider parties did not themselves consolidate long-term governing power, their electoral pressure significantly reshaped mainstream politics. The Conservative Party incorporated key elements of Brexit-era populist discourse—particularly themes of national sovereignty, anti-elite sentiment, and opposition to supranational authority—into governing practice. In this way, outsider disruption was translated into forms of insider transformation within the existing party system.

2.3 Hybrid populism and hybrid authoritarianism

While hybrid populism has emerged across democratic systems, its institutional consequences vary significantly across regions. The interaction between outsider mobilization and insider adaptation can generate divergent trajectories ranging from democratic resilience to authoritarian drift.

The United States represents the most advanced case of hybrid authoritarian drift *from within* an established democracy. Here, hybrid populism has evolved into a durable insider–outsider fusion within the Republican Party, reinforced by religious networks, partisan media ecosystems, and increasing challenges to electoral legitimacy.

Japan represents an *emerging but not yet consolidated* trajectory. Outsider populist mobilization has begun interacting with insider nationalist rhetoric within segments of the Liberal Democratic Party, producing early forms of hybrid populism. The interaction between outsider pressure and elite centralization suggests growing institutional vulnerability.

Europe, by contrast, displays widespread hybrid populism but comparatively *constrained authoritarian drift*. Institutional guardrails—including coalition politics, proportional representation, constitutional courts, and supranational constraints from the European Union—limit the consolidation of authoritarian trajectories even as populist forces continue to reshape political competition.

Figure 3 summarizes these regional trajectories.

The United States exhibits the most advanced case of hybrid authoritarian drift among the established democracies. Japan represents an emerging trajectory in which hybrid populism is developing but not yet consolidated. Europe displays widespread hybrid populism but relatively constrained authoritarian tendencies due to institutional safeguards.

Taken together, these cases reveal an asymmetric global landscape of democratic transformation. Europe exhibits extensive hybrid populism within relatively stable institutional frameworks; the United States shows the most advanced form of hybrid

Hybrid Populism and Hybrid Authoritarianism Across Europe, United States, and Japan

	Hybrid Populism	Hybrid Authoritarianism
Europe	• Outsider → Insider pressure • Policy influence strong • System-wide hybridization	• Limited authoritarian drift • EU/PR/constitutional • 'Resilient but vulnerable'
United States	• Outsider mobilization fused with insider capture • Religion = institutional	• Most advanced hybrid auth. • Party transformation (GOP) • Electoral delegitimation
Japan	• New outsider parties + insider centralization • Shinto symbolic identity	• Emerging tendencies • Cultural-symbolic legit. • 'Critical threshold zone'

Figure 3.
Regional trajectories of hybrid populism and hybrid authoritarianism.

authoritarian drift among the established democracies; and Japan occupies an intermediate position, with hybrid populism emerging but not yet fully consolidated.

As the following sections argue, these institutional trajectories ultimately reflect deeper moral-existential dynamics that shape the legitimacy and resilience of democratic life.

Understanding the conditions under which hybrid populism evolves into hybrid authoritarianism is therefore essential not only for comparative political analysis but also for the broader normative project of this book: developing an ethical and meaning-centered democratic alternative capable of countering these trajectories.

3. Existential political psychology: Values, resentment, and the rise of Japanese populism

3.1 Methodological clarification

A concise methodological clarification of the second chapter is warranted for readers who begin with this chapter. The empirical findings presented below derive from a 2025 nationally representative Japanese survey dataset analyzed in the preceding empirical chapter. The dataset integrates multi-dimensional well-being indicators, VIA-Spirituality, moral foundations measures, post-materialism items, emotional indices (anger, anxiety, sadness), and party support variables.

The purpose of the present section is primarily the theoretical integration of the chapter. Readers primarily interested in statistical details and model diagnostics may refer to the empirical second chapter.

Japan functions not merely as a national case but as an analytically clarifying context in which the existential mechanism of populism becomes particularly visible. Unlike the United States, where partisan identity is deeply entangled with religious and ideological cleavages, or parts of Europe with long-standing outsider traditions, Japan's relatively moderate party system allows underlying emotional and existential mechanisms to surface more clearly. When ideological polarization is weaker, meaning structures and affective dispositions become decisive drivers of political alignment.

While the empirical chapter develops a broader typology of populism, the present analysis focuses specifically on what may be termed *resentment-driven populism*. The Japanese evidence indicates that recent populist mobilization is less structured by coherent ideological programs than by emotional dynamics of resentment. The theoretical framework developed later—described as the *Existential Populism Model*—explains how WB and values depletion generate resentment, how resentment fosters authoritarian forms of sacredness, and how this configuration translates into far-right populist mobilization.

3.2 Meaning and hope as key predictors of party support

The following analysis reports correlations among meaning (PERMA-M, calculated as the average of three items), hope, and party support (see Appendix A).

Across regression models and party-level comparisons, well-being (WB) and PERMA-M (meaning) consistently emerge as significant predictors of party support. Supporters of centrist democratic parties—the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), and Komeito—exhibit the highest levels of meaning and hope (CDP: 0.241/0.253; SDP: 0.200/0.216; Komeito: 0.190/0.215).

By contrast, supporters of far-right outsider parties such as Sanseitō (0.162/0.173) and Hoshu-tō (0.164/0.173), as well as Reiwa (0.151/0.156), display markedly lower levels of meaning and hope, reflecting fragmentation of purpose and weakened existential coherence.

Far-right support in Japan thus appears to be driven less by ideology than by existential insecurity. Depletion of well-being and meaning creates a vacuum that political actors fill with simplified narratives of purity, victimhood, and moral restoration.

The 2025 House of Councilors election further confirms this mechanism. Parties whose supporters exhibited the lowest levels of well-being and meaning—alongside the highest resentment and authoritarian sacredness—achieved the largest seat gains. Japan's populist surge thus appears primarily resentment-driven rather than ideologically coherent.

These findings are consistent with the Existential Populism Model developed in this study, in which WB-value depletion and resentment interact with authoritarian sacredness to generate populist political mobilization.

3.3 Resentment as the motivational driver of populist support

Meaning erosion translates into a distinct emotional architecture. Supporters of far-right parties exhibit the highest levels of anger, anxiety, and sadness; this emotional triad constitutes resentment. These emotions become moralized and politicized: Anger manifests as punitive moralism, anxiety as purity-seeking boundary protection, and sadness as narratives of collective victimhood.

Resentment functions as the affective engine transforming existential insecurity into attraction toward authoritarian populism. Far-right movements convert this emotional energy into political mobilization through purity rhetoric, anti-scientific suspicion, conspiratorial narratives, and leader-centered redemption stories.

3.4 Moral foundations and psychological cleavage

The cleavage between democratic and populist orientations extends into the domain of moral foundations. According to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire developed by Jonathan Haidt and others [6], supporters of centrist democratic parties tend to score higher on Care and Fairness, whereas supporters of far-right parties exhibit relatively stronger orientations toward Authority and Sanctity (Appendix A). For example, the highest authority and sanctity scores in the Japanese party system appear among Sanseitō (Authority: 0.215; Sanctity: 0.258) and Hoshu-tō (Authority: 0.212; Sanctity: 0.248). These values indicate moral authoritarianism rather than doctrinal religiosity.

At the same time, democratic-center supporters show comparatively stronger orientations toward care and fairness. Among CDP supporters, the correlations with Care and Fairness are 0.127 and 0.108, respectively, while similar patterns are observed among SDP supporters (Care: 0.041) and JCP supporters (Care: 0.045). These patterns suggest that democratic alignment in Japan is associated with value orientations grounded in empathy, relational concern, and egalitarian fairness.

This divergence points to two distinct psychological orientations: one centered on hierarchical loyalty, authority, purity, and materialism, and the other on empathy, fairness, spirituality, and post-materialism. The Japanese evidence, therefore, suggests that sacredness itself may not constitute a single moral orientation. Rather, the patterns observed here point toward the emergence of two distinct forms of

sacredness: an authoritarian form rooted in purity and boundary defense, and a civic form grounded in care, fairness, and ethical transcendence.

3.4.1 Authoritarian sacredness: Moral core of far-right populism

The authoritarian dimension becomes particularly visible when examining the foundations of authority and sanctity. The strongest correlations occur among supporters of Sanseitō and Hoshu-tō, with authority scores of 0.215 and 0.212, respectively, and sanctity scores of 0.258 and 0.248, respectively. These represent the highest levels of authoritarian-sacredness values in the Japanese party system.

Importantly, these patterns do not indicate a higher level of genuine religiosity or spirituality in VIA (Appendix A). Instead, they suggest the presence of a politicalized form of sacredness organized around symbolic purity, social hierarchy, and exclusionary boundary maintenance. In this sense, the sacredness associated with far-right populism is better understood as a moralized emotional posture that sacralizes collective identity and authority.

3.4.2 Civic spirituality and post-materialist orientation

A contrasting pattern appears when examining spirituality and post-materialist values. The highest spirituality scores are found among supporters of Komeito (0.271), the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP; 0.269), and the Social Democratic Party (SDP; 0.266). By contrast, far-right parties display comparatively lower levels of spirituality, including Hoshu-tō (0.235) and Sanseitō (0.232). Spirituality in VIA thus correlates more strongly with democratic openness than with authoritarianism.

Post-materialist orientation shows a similar distribution. The highest post-materialism score appears among CDP supporters (0.184), followed by SDP (0.102) and JCP (0.092). By contrast, the corresponding values remain considerably lower among Reiwa (0.083), Sanseitō (0.016), and Hoshu-tō (0.011), although the latter two differences are not statistically significant. These patterns indicate that supporters of centrist and democratic-left parties tend to prioritize political freedom, participation, environmental sustainability, and human society or WB, whereas far-right supporters remain more closely tied to material security concerns and threat-sensitive value orientations.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that supporters of the democratic center combine care and fairness with spirituality and post-materialist orientation, whereas far-right supporters exhibit a distinct configuration characterized by authority, sanctity, and materialist concerns.

This combination suggests that the sacredness associated with far-right populism is not grounded in genuine spiritual or ethical transcendence. Rather, it reflects what may be described as pseudo-religious authoritarian sacredness—a moralized emotional posture centered on boundary protection, collective grievance, symbolic purity, and hierarchical order, while remaining embedded in material insecurity and resentment. In this sense, far-right supporters are not “more spiritual,” but more likely to sacralize exclusion, authority, and identity under conditions of existential and material unease.

By contrast, the spirituality found among supporters of the democratic center is associated with care, fairness, dignity, and post-materialist orientation. The Japanese evidence clearly distinguishes two forms of sacredness: authoritarian sacredness rooted in purity and hierarchy, and civic sacredness grounded in recognition [7] and pluralistic solidarity.

Taken together, the far-right psychological profile in Japan can be summarized as: low meaning + high resentment + high authoritarian sacredness + low civic spirituality + weak post-materialist orientation.

These findings reveal a moral-existential cleavage within contemporary democracy between resentment-driven authoritarian sacredness and civic sacredness grounded in pluralistic values.

3.5 The moral-existential dynamics of populism

Thus, the Japanese evidence consolidates into a dual causal structure:

a. Authoritarian pathway

WB-meaning depletion → resentment → pseudo-religious sacredness → far-right populism.

b. Democratic pathway

WB-meaning richness + hope + positive affect → civic spirituality → civic sacredness → democratic resilience.

This causal framework may be described as the *Existential Populism Model*, which links meaning structures, emotional dynamics, sacredness orientations, and political outcomes within contemporary democracy.

The Japanese evidence suggests that existential conditions structure emotional dynamics, which in turn shape orientations toward sacredness and political outcomes. **Figure 4** summarizes the Existential Populism Model: WB-meaning structures shape emotional dynamics, which shape orientations toward sacredness and ultimately political outcomes.

Taken together, the empirical findings presented above reveal a coherent psychological structure linking WB and meaning depletion, resentment emotions, and authoritarian sacredness to populist mobilization, while higher levels of WB and meaning, spirituality, and post-materialist orientation are associated with civic forms of sacredness and democratic resilience. When these psychological dynamics interact with institutional political structures, particularly hybrid populist configurations described earlier, the authoritarian pathway can acquire strong political momentum. Resentment-driven mobilization from below may align with sacralized authority from above, thereby increasing the likelihood that hybrid populism evolves into hybrid authoritarian tendencies.

In this study, spirituality and sacredness are analytically distinguished. Spirituality refers to an experiential orientation toward meaning, transcendence, and connectedness, whereas sacredness denotes the moral-symbolic structure through which such orientations become politically articulated.

In this sense, spirituality represents an experiential disposition, while sacredness describes the symbolic form that this disposition may assume within political life. Spirituality, therefore, represents the experiential source from which different forms of sacredness may emerge.

The model illustrates two distinct causal psychological pathways linking meaning structures, emotional dynamics, sacredness orientations, and political outcomes.

WB-meaning depletion and material insecurity generate resentment emotions and authoritarian sacredness, fostering far-right populist mobilization. Conversely,

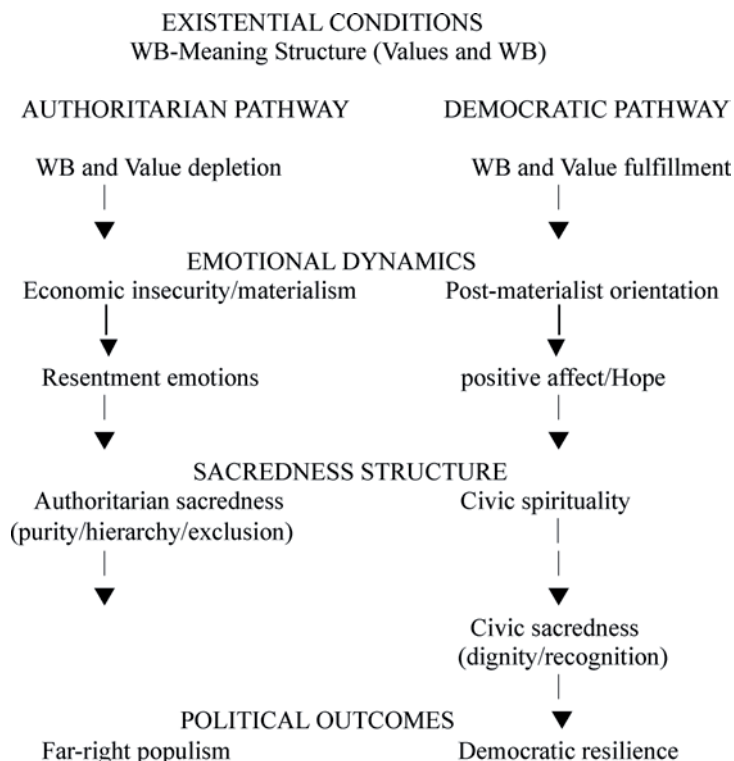


Figure 4.
 The existential populism model: Dual moral-existential pathways.

meaning abundance and positive affect cultivate civic spirituality and civic sacredness, reinforcing democratic resilience.

3.6 Meaning, religion, and the symbolic transformation of politics

The empirical findings presented in Sections 3.2–3.5 reveal a consistent pattern, as shown in the figure above. Yet this sequence cannot be understood solely in psychological terms. The transformation from emotional insecurity to moral absolutism requires a symbolic mechanism.

In late-modern democracies, religion does not disappear; it mutates. Even in societies where institutional religiosity declines, sacred meanings persist as symbolic structures organizing moral perception. When existential coherence erodes, individuals seek alternative sources of significance. Politics has become one such domain.

This symbolic transformation explains why resentment does not remain private dissatisfaction. Anger and anxiety acquire moral intensity when they are embedded in narratives of purity, corruption, and redemption. The political sphere becomes sacralized—not necessarily through formal doctrine, but through emotionally charged boundary-making.

Crucially, sacralization is not equivalent to spirituality. The Japanese data demonstrate that intrinsic spirituality correlates positively with meaning, hope, and democratic openness, whereas sacralized moralization aligns with resentment and authoritarian orientation. Sacredness, therefore, bifurcates into two trajectories:

authoritarian sacredness defending exclusionary boundaries, and civic sacredness grounded in dignity and ethical transcendence.

The key theoretical insight emerging from the Japanese case is therefore not that religion drives populism, but that existential vulnerability can redirect sacred energies into politicized forms. The erosion of meaning produces a vacuum that symbolic politics fills.

This symbolic turn prepares the ground for rethinking moral psychology itself. If sanctity is internally bifurcated—sometimes exclusionary, sometimes dignity-affirming—then existing frameworks must be reconsidered. The following section develops this argument by revisiting Haidt's sanctity foundation and reconstructing the concept of sacredness.

3.7 Emerging theoretical contributions: Toward an existential populism model

The analysis presented in this chapter points toward the *Existential Populism Model*.

3.7.1 Reframing populism as an existential phenomenon

First, the chapter reframes populism as an *existential phenomenon* rather than solely an economic or ideological one.

While much of the literature explains populist support through economic grievance, cultural backlash, or institutional distrust, the Japanese evidence suggests that *existential WB and meaning structures* play a crucial role. WB and meaning depletion generate psychological insecurity, increasing the appeal of simplified narratives of purity, moral restoration, and collective identity. Populist mobilization thus emerges not only from material dissatisfaction but also from the erosion of existential coherence.

3.7.2 Integrating emotional dynamics into populism theory

Second, the chapter highlights the central role of *emotional dynamics*, particularly resentment. WB and meaning depletion tend to produce a configuration of anger, anxiety, and sadness that forms a structure of resentment. This emotional constellation functions as a motivational engine, translating existential insecurity into political mobilization. By linking meaning structures to emotional dynamics, the Existential Populism Model provides a psychological mechanism that connects individual experience to collective political behavior.

3.7.3 Reconceptualizing sacredness in moral psychology and politics

Third, the chapter reconceptualizes *sacredness* as a bifurcated moral orientation with distinct political implications. The Japanese evidence suggests that sacredness does not operate as a single moral dimension. Instead, it divides into two trajectories: *authoritarian sacredness* and *civic sacredness*. This distinction helps explain how sacred language and moral symbolism can support either authoritarian populism or democratic resilience.

Taken together, these findings suggest that populism is not only a political or economic phenomenon but also an existential one. Contemporary populism and democratic resilience are structured by a moral-existential cleavage between authoritarian sacredness rooted in resentment and civic sacredness grounded in meaning, recognition, and multi-dimensional well-being.

By identifying the dual trajectories of authoritarian and civic sacredness, the Existential Populism Model provides a framework for understanding both the rise of populist mobilization and the conditions under which democratic resilience can emerge.

4. Sacredness reconsidered: From moral foundations to democratic reconstruction

4.1 Rethinking moral foundation theory: The limits of the sanctity foundation

Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory [6] has become a major framework in contemporary moral psychology, explaining ideological differences through foundations such as Care, Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity. In particular, Haidt's work highlights how conservatives tend to emphasize Authority and Sanctity more strongly than liberals.

Yet the Japanese evidence presented in Section 3.4. exposes an important limitation within this framework. In Haidt's framework, sanctity is largely associated with purity, avoidance of contamination, and respect for hierarchy, reflecting research on Indian religiosity and American conservatism. Three theoretical limitations follow:

First, sanctity tends to conflate transcendence with purity, linking moral elevation to boundary protection.

Second, it underestimates the possibility that sacredness may support inclusive ethical orientations.

Third, it obscures the internal differentiation of sacredness revealed in the Japanese evidence.

Thus, Haidt's model remains descriptively powerful but normatively insufficient. It explains why different moral intuitions cluster across ideological camps, but it does not address how democratic systems might stabilize moral pluralism without succumbing to the sacralized antagonism. The Japanese case, therefore, suggests that sanctity is internally bifurcated. It can take exclusionary, authoritarian form—or inclusive, relational, civic form. This bifurcation requires theoretical reconstruction.

4.2 Two forms of sacredness: Authoritarian and civic

The distinction between authoritarian sacredness and civic sacredness represents the central theoretical contribution of this chapter, providing a conceptual bridge between moral psychology, political sociology, and democratic theory.

4.2.1 Authoritarian sacredness

Authoritarian sacredness emerges when existential insecurity and resentment fuse with purity-based moralization. It sacralizes hierarchy, obedience, and boundary defense. Political disagreement becomes morally absolute; opponents are framed as the corrupting forces; compromise appears as betrayal. Sacredness functions as moral intensification.

Importantly, this form does not require doctrinal religiosity. It is a politicized sacralization—an emotional elevation of identity and exclusion into quasi-religious status. In this configuration, sacredness narrows the moral community.

4.2.2 Civic sacredness

To conceptualize this democratic form of sacralization, this chapter introduces the concept of civic sacredness. In this study, civic sacredness refers to the moral–symbolic elevation of human dignity, relational recognition, and pluralistic responsibility within democratic life, transforming existential meaning into a shared ethical orientation that sustains democratic coexistence.

Civic sacredness sacralizes not purity but moral elevation; not exclusion but inclusive love; not vertical hierarchy but horizontal responsibility. Its moral grammar affirms the intrinsic worth of people within a pluralistic order.

The moral foundations of democratic life have long been recognized in political thought. This perspective resonates with John Stuart Mill's view that the free development of individuality constitutes one of the essential conditions of well-being and democratic vitality [8, 9]. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that religion and civic associations played a crucial role in sustaining American democracy [10–12].

Later sociological scholarship developed this insight in Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion, which refers to the religious dimension of political life under conditions of church–state separation [13]. In later work, Bellah further explored how modern societies reconstruct moral meaning beyond traditional religious frameworks [14–16].

The idea of civic sacredness also resonates with Charles Taylor's argument that modern democratic societies require shared moral sources that sustain meaning and recognition within a pluralistic public sphere [17–19]. The erosion of shared moral frameworks described by Alasdair MacIntyre [20] suggests that democratic societies require renewed moral communities capable of sustaining meaning and civic responsibility.

The Japanese evidence suggests that sacredness itself is internally bifurcated. Civic sacredness is empirically associated with intrinsic spirituality, hope, and virtue orientation. Rather than intensifying antagonism, it stabilizes democratic deliberation by embedding disagreement within mutual recognition.

The distinction between authoritarian and civic sacredness does not eliminate conflict. Rather, it differentiates between two ways in which moral intensity is organized: one that contracts the moral horizon and one that expands it. This bifurcation of sacredness represents a central mechanism through which moral emotions are translated into divergent political orientations.

This distinction does not reject Jonathan Haidt's insight that sanctity plays a powerful role in moral psychology. Rather, the Japanese evidence suggests two orientations of sacredness. This distinction constitutes a central theoretical contribution of this chapter, providing a conceptual bridge between moral psychology, political sociology, and democratic theory.

4.3 Historical oscillation: Two forms of sacredness across civilizational time

Across civilizational history, political communities have repeatedly oscillated between two forms of sacralization.

Authoritarian sacredness has appeared in divine kingship, Jacobin moral absolutism, fascist political religion, totalitarian myth, and exclusionary nationalism. In these configurations, sacredness narrows the moral community and fuses political authority with moral purification.

Civic sacredness, by contrast, has manifested in Greek and Roman republican virtue, and modern civic humanism, American civil religion [13], and strands of

communitarian thought. Here, sacredness affirms the dignity of people and ethical constitutional order.

The oscillation between these forms reflects not merely institutional shifts but transformations in moral imagination. When existential insecurity intensifies, authoritarian sacredness expands. When meaning, hope, and relational recognition are cultivated, civic sacredness stabilizes pluralistic democracy.

Japan today displays both tendencies simultaneously: far-right pseudo-religiosity rooted in resentment and boundary defense, and centrist civic spirituality grounded in individual dignity and relational responsibility. The Japanese case, therefore, functions as a microcosm of a broader civilizational tension.

Contemporary politics is not necessarily about religion versus secularism; it can be about rival modes of sacralization.

4.4 Normative implications: Divergent democratic trajectories

The bifurcation of sacredness carries direct implications for democratic futures. Authoritarian sacredness tends toward:

- purity politics
- exclusionary boundary construction
- conspiratorial thinking
- moralized polarization
- strongman appeals
- authoritarian institutional drift

Civic sacredness, in contrast, supports:

- human dignity
- relationality and responsibility
- ethical meaning
- mutual recognition
- pluralistic transcendence
- resilient democratic deliberation

Both forms of sacredness emerge from the same human search for meaning and transcendence, but they orient this search in different directions: authoritarian sacredness protects identity through exclusionary boundaries, whereas civic sacredness affirms dignity through recognition and pluralistic solidarity. Sacredness, therefore, should not be understood as inherently authoritarian; it represents a moral-symbolic capacity that can support either exclusionary populism or democratic renewal.

The critical distinction is not between moral intensity and neutrality. Democracies cannot survive on procedural neutrality alone. The question is whether moral

intensity will be organized around exclusion or dignity. Japan already possesses the psychological and ethical resources necessary for civic sacredness—visible in its centrist and intrinsic spirituality. Yet these resources require philosophical articulation and institutional cultivation. Without such articulation, authoritarian sacredness may fill the symbolic vacuum left by the erosion of meaning.

4.5 From sacredness to morality: Toward Ethical Communitarian Democracy

The Japanese evidence demonstrates that democracy requires more than institutional design or procedural safeguards. It requires an ethical–existential infrastructure capable of sustaining civic sacredness. This shift can be understood as a *moral reorientation of the sacred*, in which ethical commitment is redirected toward individual dignity and relational recognition/responsibility. Civic sacredness, in turn, nurtures forms of ethical elevation that orient moral commitment within pluralistic life.

In light of these findings, this study introduces the concept of Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD)—a normative framework in which democratic legitimacy is grounded not merely in procedural neutrality, but in the relational co-flourishing of persons within a shared moral ecology. In this sense, ECD reconceives democracy not merely as a mechanism for aggregating preferences, but as a civic order oriented toward the cultivation of shared meaning and ethical elevation.

This concept draws inspiration from the broader communitarian tradition yet rearticulates it in light of empirical research on flourishing and contemporary democratic vulnerability. Its fuller theoretical grounding will be developed in the following sections, but its foundational elements can already be discerned from the empirical patterns observed here.

1. Meaning as a Democratic Necessity

Low meaning → resentment → sacralized antagonism → populist destabilization.

Meaning is not a luxury but a structural condition of democratic resilience.

2. Hope and Positive Affect as Civic Resources

Hope counters despair; positive affect expands trust, cognitive flexibility, and cooperative orientation. Democratic stability depends on affective expansion rather than contraction.

3. Ethical Responsibility as the Core of Civic Sacredness

Civic spirituality is rooted in compassion, fraternity, and responsibility—not purity or domination. It sacralizes relational inclusion rather than exclusion.

4. Democracies Require a Moral Ecology

Institutions alone cannot generate legitimacy. Meaning, recognition, and shared ethical horizons supply the background conditions of public judgment. This insight echoes the conception of a “public philosophy” [21, 22] and the value ecology explained later.

5. Ethical Communitarian Democracy as Democratic Reconstruction

ECD integrates:

- existential meaning [23]
- hope and positive affect
- mutual recognition and reciprocity
- responsibility
- ethical transcendence
- community well-being
- empirically informed flourishing science

In this framework, democracy is understood as a communal *value-generating political process* rather than a value-neutral arena of preference aggregation. A value-generating moral order refers to a system of interacting moral values and social relations that enables people to experience individual dignity, relational recognition, and meaning within a shared civic order. ECD does not abolish moral conflict; it redirects moral intensity toward dignity-affirming forms of sacredness. Its aim is not ideological uniformity but the cultivation of civic sacredness within pluralistic institutions.

To sustain democracy in an age of existential volatility, civic sacredness—not authoritarian sacralization—must become the public ethos. The subsequent chapters elaborate how Ethical Communitarian Democracy provides the civic and institutional articulation of this ethical reorientation, translating civic sacredness into a durable moral ecology of democratic life.

5. Innovative public philosophy

5.1 Classical and modern foundations for civic sacredness

Building on the preceding analyses of religion, sacredness, and meaning—both in comparative perspective and in the Japanese electoral data—we can now explore a decisive distinction between the two sacredness.

To strengthen the civic sacredness—rather than surrender the symbolic terrain of religion and the sacred to authoritarian forces—it is necessary to revisit the history of political thought. The following sections, therefore, return to Popper, Plato, Aristotle, and Lippmann to reconstruct a philosophical lineage capable of sustaining a value-centered public philosophy in the face of resentment-driven populism.

5.2 Karl Popper and the ethical paradox of the open society: The blind spot of value-neutral liberalism

Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* [24] stands as one of the most influential defenses of liberal democracy in the twentieth century. Writing in the shadow of fascism and totalitarianism, Popper rejected historicism—the belief that political

life unfolds according to quasi-historical laws—and instead defended critical reason, piecemeal reform, and institutional safeguards.

His open society is grounded in scientific fallibilism and critical rationalism, as well as in vigilant opposition to authoritarianism. Yet the empirical evidence presented in this chapter reveals a blind spot in Popper's framework. Rational procedures alone cannot sustain democratic life when values and shared meaning collapse. Citizens require ethical commitment, emotional resources, and moral coherence—conditions that Popper did not treat as political variables.

The Japanese evidence illustrates this limit with unusual clarity. WB and meaning depletion correlate with resentment, and resentment aligns with authority–purity–based sacredness. These findings suggest that Popper's value-neutral rationalism underestimated three elements essential to democratic stability: the necessity of a moral ecology, the fragility of emotional equilibrium, and the political significance of existential values.

The paradox of the open society lies precisely here. An open society depends upon ethical resources that it does not itself fully theorize. Trust, mutual recognition, and shared meaning are not merely institutional arrangements; they are ethical–existential conditions that sustain democratic cooperation.

When shared meaning weakens, emotional reactions such as resentment, fear, and despair increasingly replace deliberative reasoning. In this context, WB and value depletion become the psychological entry point for populist mobilization.

The crisis of the open society in the twenty-first century is therefore not only external but also internal. Liberal proceduralism cannot compensate for the erosion of the moral and existential foundations upon which its own stability ultimately depends.

5.3 Why Popper must be the starting point for a new public philosophy?

Yet Popper must remain the starting point.

His defense of openness establishes the non-negotiable framework within which any modern democratic reconstruction must operate. Without these, civic sacredness itself would risk degenerating into dogma.

The limitation of Popper's theory is that the open society secures the structure of democratic freedom, but it does not supply its moral energy. The twenty-first century reveals that procedural rationalism needs deeper ethical conditions. Citizens must possess not only critical rationality but existential value orientation sufficient to sustain disagreement without moral collapse.

An open society, therefore, requires a form of civic sacredness: a shared moral horizon that affirms dignity and commonness without demanding uniformity, and that anchors pluralism in ethical sincerity rather than relativism.

Popper defended the architecture of openness. The task now is to articulate the ethical infrastructure that makes that architecture livable.

Thus, the reconstruction proposed in this chapter does not abandon liberal democracy, but it completes it. For this purpose, it is important for us to turn our eyes to Plato's philosophy, which Popper attacked.

5.4 Plato and Aristotle: Ancient foundations of ethical democracy and the populist cycle

Modern populism is often described as a pathology specific to late-modern liberal societies. Yet from the standpoint of classical political philosophy, its core dynamics

are neither novel nor historically contingent. Plato and Aristotle, writing in the aftermath of Athenian democratic turbulence, diagnosed emotional, moral, and structural tendencies that closely parallel contemporary developments. Their analyses reveal that democratic instability emerges not primarily from institutional design, but from transformations in moral psychology and civic character.

5.4.1 Plato: The moral psychology of democratic decline

In *Republic* VIII–IX, Plato [25] presents a sequence of regime degeneration culminating in tyranny. Democracy becomes unstable, he argues, when the hierarchy of the soul collapses—when reason no longer governs spiritedness (*thumos*) and desire (*epithumia*). The “democratic man” is characterized by the leveling of distinctions between necessary and unnecessary desires, allowing pleasure and appetite to dominate the soul in the name of freedom. All desires claim equal legitimacy, and the pursuit of private gratification triumphs.

This psychological change has political consequences. From a contemporary perspective, Plato’s analysis may be interpreted as follows: Resentment toward perceived elites intensifies; internal conflicts arise. Demagogues mislead people. The tyrant is not an external imposition but the culmination of a democratic culture that has lost ethical orientation.

Plato’s diagnosis, therefore, anticipates the mechanism empirically observed in the Japanese data: When logos no longer structures civic life, symbolic absolutism fills the void. Democracy decays because it fails to cultivate ethical education (*paideia*), shared meaning, and virtue (*aretē*).

Plato’s insight is thus fundamentally ethical: The stability of political institutions reflects the ordered structure of the soul, and when the proper hierarchy of reason over desire collapses within the soul, the polity comes to mirror that disorder. A political community can endure only when the rational elements of the polity govern its appetitive elements, mirroring the just order of the soul in which reason oriented toward the good governs desire. Just as the internal moral order disintegrates, the external political order comes to reflect its disorder.

5.4.2 Aristotle: Community, virtue, and the stabilizing middle

Aristotle refines and moderates Plato’s account by grounding political stability in virtue ethics and the doctrine of the Golden Mean. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* [26] and *Politics* [27], he argues that sustainable self-government depends upon citizens capable of practical judgment (*phronēsis*) and fraternity (*philia*). A good self-governing polity is viable only when citizens are neither dominated by extreme wealth nor by deprivation, and neither governed by rage nor by unbounded appetite.

For Aristotle, the middle class performs not merely an economic function but a psychological one: It moderates emotion and tempers factional extremism. Political stability rests upon a citizenry sufficiently virtuous to deliberate about the common good.

In this respect, Aristotle anticipates the dangers posed by contemporary far-right populism. A polity that fails to cultivate eudaimonia—flourishing through virtue—tends to degenerate.

The Japanese data provide empirical resonance. Centrist voters exhibit higher levels of existential values, including meaning, intrinsic spirituality, a fairness/care

orientation, and positive affect. Far-right supporters cluster around authority–purity moral foundations, resentment emotions, and materialist threat sensitivity. Aristotle would interpret this not merely as ideological divergence, but as divergence in character. Democratic resilience depends upon citizens whose emotional lives are moderated by values and whose identities are anchored in civic fraternity rather than grievance.

5.5 Contemporary populism as a recurrence of the ancient problem

The convergence between classical philosophy and contemporary evidence reveals a structural continuity across time. Populism is not an anomaly of modernity but a recurring outcome of democracies that lose ethical orientation.

Plato identified the psychological trajectory: disordered desire erodes politics; resentment intensifies; charismatic authority promises ever greater shares to people; the tyrant culminates in dictatorship.

Aristotle identified the civic trajectory: The erosion of virtue weakens political commitment to the common good; weakened moderation destabilizes the regime.

Contemporary populism across Europe, the United States, and Japan follows the same sequence. Values collapse produces emotional contraction; emotional contraction fuels purity narratives and outsider resentment; sacralized antagonism supplants deliberation.

The implication is not antiquarian. It is diagnostic. Democracies that neglect the cultivation of values, virtue, and civic fraternity reproduce the very dynamics Plato and Aristotle described.

5.6 Implications for Ethical Communitarian Democracy

From the standpoint of this chapter, Plato and Aristotle yield three enduring claims.

First, democracy requires an ethical soul in addition to institutions. Procedural safeguards cannot compensate for deficits in civic character.

Second, values and civic fraternity constitute the emotional glue of a political community. Without shared orientation toward the good, freedom fragments into antagonism.

Third, populism emerges when ethical foundations decay. The rise of authoritarian sacredness is not merely ideological but existential.

Ethical Communitarian Democracy thus stands as the contemporary articulation of classical political philosophy in the context of late-modern value depletion. It seeks to institutionalize the moral ecology that Plato called *paideia*, and Aristotle described as virtue and *philia*, integrating these insights with modern democratic commitments and the empirical science of flourishing.

In an age of hybrid populism and existential fragmentation, the classical insight becomes newly urgent: Democracy survives only when it cultivates values, including meaning.

5.7 Walter Lippmann: Public philosophy as civility and natural law

Walter Lippmann provides the modern articulation of the classical ethical philosophies of Plato. In *Essays in the Public Philosophy* [28], he argued that democracy depends on a shared public philosophy.

Lippmann described the public philosophy as the philosophy of civility based on natural law in Western civilization: it justifies liberty and rights. Without this, emotional impulse replaces reason, for example, by the manipulation of government and media, as he indicated in his well-known *Public Opinion* [29]. Stereotypes influence people's recognition. This tends to turn democracy into a dictatorship, as was seen in World War II.

His concept of public philosophy confronts the systemic nature of this vulnerability. Inspired by Plato, Lippmann increasingly emphasized morality in his later work. Thus, democracies require public philosophy, shared norms that anchor judgment. When public philosophy deteriorates, citizens become susceptible to charismatic authority and dictatorship.

The Japanese evidence provides empirical confirmation of Lippmann's diagnosis. WB and value depletion predict resentment; resentment predicts authoritarian sacredness; authoritarian sacredness predicts populist alignment. Conversely, WB and values, such as meaning, intrinsic spirituality, hope, and positive affect, correlate with democratic moderation and resilience.

Lippmann anticipated a central finding of this chapter: Democratic institutions cannot compensate for an existential vacuum.

5.8 Lippmann as the bridge to Ethical Communitarian Democracy

Within the conceptual architecture of this study, Lippmann occupies a pivotal position.

Popper defends openness.

Plato and Aristotle defend virtue and the common good.

Lippmann explains how shared moral orientation must be established as public philosophy.

Ethical Communitarian Democracy extends this trajectory. It seeks not merely to preserve procedural democracy but to reconstruct its ethical ground. It integrates existential meaning, civic sacredness, and empirically grounded science of flourishing into a coherent democratic framework.

If liberalism hollowed out its own ethical foundations in the name of neutrality, ECD seeks to restore them without reverting to dogma. It aims to recover moral depth without surrendering liberty. Its aim is not a theological-specific doctrine but civic sacredness—a dignity-affirming, relational moral orientation that can sustain political pluralism.

In this sense, Lippmann stands at the threshold of reconstruction. He recognized that democracies fail when shared public moral understanding collapses and succeed when moral ecology stabilizes civic life. He can be regarded as a starting point of contemporary communitarianism, and Ethical Communitarian Democracy operationalizes his insight for a meaning-depleted age.

6. Ethical Communitarian Democracy

6.1 Reconstructing value ecology in democratic life

The preceding sections converge on a central finding: Contemporary democracies do not collapse primarily because of ideology or economic decline, but because of the erosion of values such as meaning, mattering, and morality. Populism flourishes precisely where these ethical–existential foundations fail.

In this context, Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD) is proposed as a value-centered, post-liberal democratic philosophy that integrates flourishing science with classical ethics and modern political theory, drawing on communitarian political philosophy [30–34].

ECD begins with a foundational premise: *democracy is a communal value-generating political process* of people's self-government. When values collapse, democratic legitimacy collapses. The following sections reconstruct ECD as a normative architecture capable of sustaining democratic life in the twenty-first century.

6.2 The meaning crisis and the erosion of legitimacy

The Japan 2025 data demonstrate that declining democratic legitimacy arises from WB and value depletion. This confirms, normatively, what Michael Sandel argued philosophically: When citizens feel unrecognized within meritocratic liberalism, they experience not merely dissatisfaction but ontological invalidation, including a loss of dignity [33].

Under such conditions, anger becomes the easiest emotional substitute for values, purity narratives offer counterfeit belonging, and populism becomes the most efficient political translation of despair. The contemporary crisis is therefore ontological before it is political. Democratic repair must begin not with procedural adjustments but with the reconstruction of a shared moral horizon—a value ecology within which democratic life is experienced as purposeful.

6.3 Concept definition: Ethical communitarianism

Ethical Communitarianism is a democratic–philosophical framework in which legitimacy is grounded not in preference aggregation or procedural neutrality, but in the co-flourishing of persons through morality and ethical relational life.

Modern liberalism, particularly in its Rawlsian formulation [35], is characterized by two defining commitments.

First, it aspires to value neutrality in public justification, bracketing comprehensive conceptions of the good life from political decision-making. Justice is articulated independently of substantive visions of the good.

Second, it grounds justice primarily in the protection of individual rights, treating persons as autonomous bearers of entitlements whose freedom must be secured against interference.

Communitarian thinkers such as Michael Sandel [36] challenged this framework, arguing that justice cannot be meaningfully separated from conceptions of the good life and that citizens are embedded in moral traditions and communities that shape their identities.

Jürgen Habermas [37] sought to preserve liberal neutrality while strengthening democratic legitimacy through deliberative procedures. His theory of communicative action and discourse ethics emphasizes rational justification within public reason and intersubjective validity claims: truth, rightness, truthfulness/sincerity. Yet even deliberative liberalism presupposes motivational and ethical resources, including truthfulness/sincerity, and procedural norms alone cannot generate. Discourse ethics can regulate argumentation, but it does not itself supply the existential moral energy necessary for communicative actions. In this sense, late-modern democracies face what may be described as a motivational deficit of discourse ethics. Thus, this motivational deficit marks a structural limitation of proceduralist theories of democracy.

Building on these debates, I characterize communitarianism [38] through two central features:

6.3.1 *Ethical (the Good)*

Questions of justice cannot be insulated from debates about the good life. Democratic deliberation often engages ethical conceptions of morality, virtue, and purpose.

6.3.2 *Togetherness (“with” or “in common”)*

Citizens do not merely coexist under shared procedures; they deliberate and act together in sustaining a common world. “Together” refers not to a fixed or homogeneous community but to dynamic, multi-layered, and evolving forms of association or community—local, national, global, intergenerational, and emergent—shaped through ongoing interaction.

For conceptual clarity, this orientation may be described as *ethical communalism*, emphasizing both ethical substance and relational dynamism. Nevertheless, because “communitarianism” remains the established term in political theory, I retain it here. To prevent the focus on “community” from eclipsing the ethical dimension of the good life, I employ the term “ethical communitarianism,” which signifies both elements above. The essence of this conception can be expressed as *ethical relationality*.

This formulation makes explicit what has often remained implicit: Communitarian thought has always contained a strong ethical and spiritual or religious orientation [19, 20, 39]. In the present study, this ethical emphasis is reinforced by empirical analysis of value orientations, especially meaning, mattering, religious dimensions, and civic spirituality. Just as communitarianism is sometimes called liberal communitarianism, Ethical Communitarianism therefore retains a liberal element, but one that goes beyond value-neutral proceduralism by integrating ethical substance and relational commonness.

In the broader framework of this study, Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD) represents the institutional and philosophical articulation of what the empirical analysis describes as *Flourishing Democracy (FD)*, as explained in the conclusion (Section 8.3). This democratic orientation is there conceptualized more precisely as *Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (EMDD)*—a democratic order sustained by multi-dimensional well-being. While EMDD expresses the normative horizon of democratic flourishing, ECD provides the civic and institutional framework through which such flourishing can be cultivated and sustained within democratic societies.

Ethical Communitarianism begins from the recognition that morality and virtue are the essential public goods rather than merely private dispositions; that values function as democratic infrastructure rather than optional luxury; that human beings are relational rather than atomistic; that well-being is partly constituted through relational recognition and cannot be reduced to utility or choice; and that civic sacredness, not authoritarian sacredness, sustains democratic orientation.

By emphasizing ethical relationality, this framework avoids two classical traps. It neither reduces ethical life to voluntary contractual exchange nor dissolves individuals into collective identities. Instead, it understands persons as flourishing within value ecologies—families, associations, communities, institutions, and narratives—that exceed the individual while preserving liberty and pluralism.

In this sense, Ethical Communitarianism may be understood as a systematic clarification and empirical extension of communitarian theory under conditions of late-modern democratic vulnerability.

6.4 Definition of ECD: How it differs from classical communitarianism?

Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD) refers to a form of democracy grounded in ethical communitarianism, a framework in which democratic legitimacy arises from the ethical and relational co-flourishing of persons within a shared moral ecology, rather than from procedural neutrality or preference aggregation alone. While it stands in continuity with communitarian thinkers such as Etzioni, Sandel, and Putnam, it develops in decisive ways from them.

Amitai Etzioni developed a communitarian framework based on moral voice and responsibility [30], but explicitly rejected well-being indicators [40] because, at the early stage, well-being research was dominated by hedonic satisfaction measures. He passed away before the eudaimonic turn made values empirically measurable. ECD incorporates what Etzioni could not imagine: an empirically grounded, value-centered measurement architecture that operationalizes ethical relationality.

Michael Sandel diagnosed the recognition crisis of meritocratic liberalism, and his argument is naturally philosophical [33]. ECD extends his critique by drawing on empirical evidence regarding meaning, mattering, and civic sacredness. Mattering refers to the experience that one's existence and actions are significant to others and to the shared moral order, linking personal meaning with relational recognition.

Robert Putnam highlighted the decline in trust by introducing the concept of social capital, yet largely examined it through sociological or political science lenses [32, 41]. ECD moves from diagnosis to normative reconstruction, proposing political ways to rebuild trust, recognition, cooperation, and civic fraternity.

In this sense, ECD represents communitarianism in the new stage: Ethical communitarianism avoids an excessive focus on fixed cultural community cohesion and introduces a sense of dynamic ethical relationality; from sociological description to normative architecture; from moral nostalgia to eudaimonic contemporary good life; and from critique to institutional design. Thus, Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD) is defined as a democratic model in which legitimacy is grounded in the ethical and relational co-flourishing of persons sustained by civic sacredness and a shared value ecology.

6.5 Institutionalizing value ecology: Integration with flourishing science

ECD advances beyond classical communitarianism by integrating findings from flourishing science. WB and value indicators function as diagnostic sensors for the moral-psychological infrastructure of democracy. PERMA-M can indicate existential direction; mattering captures relational recognition; hope signals future orientation; positive affect reflects emotional soundness; and civic spirituality expresses ethical sacredness. This empirical grounding renders ECD a genuinely *post-liberal communitarian theory*: normatively robust and scientifically informed. If WB and values constitute democratic infrastructure, institutions must cultivate and monitor the health of value ecology. The institutional implications of this principle include measurement governance, recognition-centered welfare, deliberative civic forums, and symbolic practices of civic belonging. The following section examines these institutional

pathways in greater detail. The goal is not technocratic supervision but democratic self-governance: a polity capable of diagnosing and repairing its own moral ecology.

6.6 Institutional illustrations

To clarify feasibility, consider two illustrative examples drawn from existing democratic practice rather than hypothetical redesign.

First, measurement governance need not introduce new bureaucratic control. Several advanced democracies, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, already incorporate well-being dashboards or well-being frameworks into policy evaluation, alongside economic indicators. A meaning-sensitive extension could include periodic national reporting on perceived mattering, civic trust, and relational well-being. These would function as diagnostic signals—similar to economic early-warning indicators—that inform public deliberation rather than prescribe specific policy outcomes.

Second, recognition-centered institutional design can be implemented through structured participatory mechanisms already familiar to many municipalities. For example, participatory budgeting processes may incorporate explicit reflection on civic recognition, asking participants not only whether policies are efficient but whether deliberative processes convey voice, support, and alternatives. This subtly shifts evaluative focus from aggregate preference satisfaction toward relational legitimacy.

These illustrations demonstrate that Ethical Communitarian Democracy does not require constitutional transformation or centralized moral direction. Rather, it involves recalibrating existing institutional tools to sustain the democratic value ecology.

6.7 Ethical Communitarian Democracy as a post-liberal politics: Toward a multi-civilizational global flourishing world

ECD advances beyond liberal neutrality by affirming that value ecology is not optional: meaning is a public good; civic sacredness is democratically desirable; responsibility accompanies rights; virtue elevates the quality of judgment; and flourishing is relational as well as individual.

At the same time, ECD safeguards rights, pluralism, freedom, and equal dignity. It therefore represents an alternative to liberal individualism, conservative nationalism, collectivist moral authoritarianism, and nihilistic postmodernism—a value-centered democracy suited to an age of existential fragmentation.

Thus, ECD clarifies its status as a post-liberal rather than anti-liberal framework. It occupies a middle position between value-neutral proceduralism and coercive perfectionism. It affirms that democracy requires shared ethical infrastructure, yet leaves substantive visions of the good life to plural citizens within that shared horizon.

Finally, ECD points beyond national repair toward a multi-civilizational flourishing world grounded in ecological consciousness, coexistence, and the shared pursuit of human flourishing.

In a world threatened by hybrid authoritarianism, Ethical Communitarian Democracy offers not utopia but reconstruction: rebuilding the existential and ethical foundations upon which democratic life depends.

6.8 Addressing potential critiques: Normative limits and democratic safeguards

Any proposal that foregrounds value ecology as democratic infrastructure inevitably raises normative questions. Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD), therefore, clarifies its limits and safeguards as follows.

6.8.1 Normative overreach

One possible objection is that ECD substitutes liberal neutrality with a substantive ethical doctrine, thereby overextending democratic authority into moral life. This concern misunderstands the scope of the proposal. ECD does not prescribe a single comprehensive conception of a good life. Rather, it identifies minimal ethical preconditions—individual dignity, relational recognition/responsibility—without which pluralistic self-government becomes unstable. Values in ECD are not substantive content imposed by the state, but infrastructural capacity: the ability of citizens to experience meaning and mattering within shared institutions. In this sense, ECD operates at the level of enabling conditions rather than doctrinal imposition.

6.8.2 Paternalism and the autonomy question

A second concern is paternalism. Does institutionalizing meaning and civic sacredness undermine individual autonomy? ECD explicitly rejects perfectionist authoritarian coercion. Its institutional orientation is indirect and facilitative rather than directive, although some public policies may include value orientations. Policies such as what may be called recognition-centered welfare, deliberative forums, and civic rituals aim to expand relational agency rather than constrain personal conscience. Recognition-centered welfare refers to forms of social provision that aim not only at material redistribution but at sustaining dignity, social recognition, and relational participation. The framework, therefore, aligns more closely with communitarian and republican non-domination than with moral authoritarianism. Autonomy is preserved precisely because citizens are supported in sustaining the relational conditions that make meaningful choice possible.

6.8.3 Risks of measurement governance

The proposal to monitor WB and value raises technocratic concerns. Could measurement governance become a form of moral surveillance? Three safeguards are essential:

1. Indicators function diagnostically, not prescriptively.
2. Measurement remains transparent and publicly contestable.
3. WB metrics complement, rather than replace, democratic deliberation. ECD treats flourishing indicators as early-warning signals of moral-ecological stress, not as substitutes for political judgment. Just as economic statistics inform but do not dictate policy, meaning-related metrics inform without commanding.

6.8.4 Civic sacredness and pluralism

Perhaps the most delicate issue concerns the relationship between civic sacredness and pluralism. If democracy sacralizes dignity and responsibility, does it marginalize dissenting moral traditions? Civic sacredness differs fundamentally from authoritarian sacredness. It does not sacralize purity, homogeneity, or exclusion. Instead, it sacralizes equal dignity and reciprocal recognition—principles that expand rather than contract moral community. In this sense, civic sacredness constitutes a thin normative horizon within which pluralism can coexist. Pluralism without shared commitments risks fragmentation; sacred commitment without pluralism risks authoritarianism. ECD seeks a middle ground: a civically shared ethic that protects diversity by grounding it in mutual recognition.

6.8.5 Institutional feasibility

Finally, critics may question the feasibility. How can value-centered governance be operationalized within existing democracies? ECD does not require a constitutional overhaul. Many democracies already collect well-being statistics (e.g., OECD frameworks), employ deliberative citizen assemblies, and experiment with participatory budgeting. Recognition-centered welfare policies and civic education initiatives similarly exist in partial form. ECD systematizes and normatively integrates these practices rather than inventing entirely new institutional architectures. Its feasibility lies in recombination and recalibration, not radical redesign.

7. Institutionalizing value ecology: Infrastructures of Ethical Communitarian Democracy

7.1 From hybrid populism to hybrid authoritarianism: A moral-existential mechanism

The institutional dynamics of hybrid populism described in Section 2 can also be understood through the moral-existential mechanism developed in this chapter.

In hybrid systems such as the United States and, increasingly, Japan, populism does not emerge solely from outsider mobilization. Rather, outsider mobilization interacts with insider political leadership and institutional power. When this interaction becomes coupled with authoritarian forms of sacredness, the result is a particularly potent configuration of political mobilization.

In such contexts, resentment-driven populism, the focus in this chapter, acquires not only mass emotional energy but also institutional reinforcement from above. This combination helps explain why hybrid populism in the United States has produced pronounced authoritarian tendencies during the Trump presidency, and why similar dynamics may emerge in other democracies where outsider resentment and insider sacralized authority converge.

The existential populism model developed in this chapter therefore provides the psychological mechanism by which hybrid populism can evolve into hybrid authoritarianism. Hybrid authoritarianism emerges when resentment-driven populism from below converges with sacralized authority from above.

7.2 Meta-theoretical recap: Values as democratic infrastructure

If WB and values depletion function as an enabling condition for resentment-driven populism to become electorally dominant, then democratic stabilization cannot be achieved through ideological counter-messaging, elite turnover, or performance optimization alone. What must be restored is the emotional–moral infrastructure of democratic life: dignity, meaning, mattering, and virtue.

Japan reveals it with unusual clarity, because strong ideological carriers do not obscure the emotional substrate. WB and values, therefore, provide a comparative lens that renders previously fragmented populism literature analytically commensurable.

This reframing shifts the core normative question. The problem is not only how populism emerges but also how democratic legitimacy can be restored through the reconstruction of the value ecology. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, turns to normative pathways out of populism. The contemporary crisis of democracy is fundamentally a crisis of values: When shared meaning erodes, authoritarian sacredness can mobilize resentment and exclusion unless civic sacredness is consciously cultivated within democratic life.

7.3 Normative foundations: Democracy as a flourishing project

Ethical Communitarian Democracy reframes democracy not as a procedurally neutral mechanism but as an ethical project oriented toward sustaining human flourishing. Three interlocking principles guide institutional and ethical design:

7.3.1 Values as a public good

Against the assumption of value-neutral liberalism, values and meaning are not merely private experiences but shared civic resources.

7.3.2 Recognition as democratic equality

Populism feeds on humiliation and invisibility; democratic repair is necessary. Citizens must experience their lives as mattering and with dignity.

7.3.3 Relationality as the condition of civic agency

Trust and civic fraternity are preconditions of public judgment. Without relational infrastructure, atomized citizens are more susceptible to resentment-driven mobilization.

These principles elevate democracy from a procedural regime to an ethical–psychological ecology. Escaping populism entails repairing this ecology.

The institutional architecture of Ethical Communitarian Democracy can be conceptualized as four complementary forms of democratic infrastructure: cognitive (measurement governance), existential (meaning infrastructure), relational (recognition infrastructure), and communal (civic reciprocity).

7.4 Measurement governance: Making value ecology visible

A central meta-institutional tool for democratic self-maintenance is measurement governance—the integration of value-ecology indicators into public evaluation and democratic reflection.

Several democracies have already begun to incorporate well-being measurement into public governance. For example, the OECD's Better Life Initiative, the United Kingdom's national well-being statistics developed by the Office for National Statistics, and Australia's recent "Measuring What Matters" framework illustrate how governments increasingly monitor social and psychological indicators alongside economic metrics.

Alongside economic indicators such as GDP, democracies could monitor:

- perceived meaning and narrative coherence
- civic recognition and mattering
- multi-dimensional well-being, including relational trust and belonging.

These indicators would function diagnostically rather than prescriptively. Their purpose is not to direct policy outcomes but to enhance democratic self-awareness. Just as economic statistics reveal inflationary or employment stress, declines in meaning, recognition, or multi-dimensional well-being may signal emerging political fragility.

7.5 Meaning infrastructure: Cultivating civic purpose

Escaping resentment-driven populism requires more than counter-messaging. Democracies must cultivate environments in which citizens can experience their lives as purposeful within a shared civic world.

The idea of civic education oriented toward reflective citizenship draws on traditions of democratic education from Dewey [42] to contemporary discussions of civic virtue and public reasoning [21, 43].

Illustrative directions may include:

- Civic curriculum for values: integrating ethical reflection and civic purpose into education in ways that foster reflective citizenship rather than doctrinal instruction.
- Public philosophy forums: structured yet pluralistic spaces—physical or digital—where citizens deliberate about justice, dignity, and collective direction.
- Purpose-sensitive policy evaluation: assessing whether major reforms strengthen or erode meaning, dignity, and relational cohesion alongside economic criteria.

These examples are indicative rather than programmatic. Their role is to clarify how value ecology might be institutionally supported without prescribing uniform moral content.

7.6 Recognition infrastructure: Translating equality into lived respect and equity

Resentment often originates in humiliation and invisibility. Recognition theory has long emphasized that experiences of misrecognition and humiliation can generate social resentment [7, 17]. Democratic institutions must therefore translate formal equality into lived recognition and ethical equity.

Communitarian welfare must restore people's dignity and agency through recognition-centered policies—such as worker cooperatives, community schools, mutual-aid platforms, and welfare programs that emphasize contribution and belonging.

Illustrative directions may include:

- Recognition-sensitive administrative design, ensuring that procedures in schools, welfare systems, and public services convey respect and voice.
- Preventive grievance mechanisms, addressing experiences of bureaucratic disrespect before they harden into political antagonism.
- Local deliberative councils, fostering restorative practices and reciprocal accountability within communities.

Again, the emphasis is on facilitation rather than coercion: Institutions expand recognition agencies without dictating moral outcomes.

7.7 Communal infrastructure: Enabling civic fraternity

Communal bonds cannot be mandated, but they can be enabled. Research on social capital shows the importance of communal bonds [32].

Illustrative directions may include:

- Deliberative institutions—such as citizen assemblies and structured public forums—can cultivate civic fraternity rather than polarization [44, 45].
- Cross-group civic initiatives, bringing citizens together around shared practical projects.
- Reciprocity platforms, encouraging everyday experiences of giving and receiving beyond market exchange.
- Belonging-oriented public spaces, designed to foster informal sociability and plural encounters.

Communal infrastructure, therefore, sustains the everyday conditions under which civic sacredness, mutual recognition, and democratic cooperation become durable features of pluralistic democratic life. Together, these cognitive, existential, relational, and communal infrastructures constitute the institutional architecture that sustains democratic life.

7.8 Democratic governance as value ecology stewardship

Taken together, these elements reconceptualize democratic governance as stewardship of value ecology. Escaping populism is not a single reform but an ongoing process of sustaining the moral–psychological conditions of legitimacy.

In this perspective, democratic politics gradually shifts its normative orientation:
from anger toward meaning,
from humiliation toward recognition,
from isolation toward relational solidarity,
and from authoritarian sacredness toward civic sacredness.

7.9 Ethical Communitarian Democracy as a new public philosophy

Ethical Communitarian Democracy can revise the contemporary public philosophy emerging from Lippmann as well as from Hannah Arendt [46] and Jürgen Habermas [45]: It completes the architecture of this chapter by offering a new public philosophy capable of guiding democracies out of the populist trap. It is:

- classical in its understanding of human purpose,
- communitarian in its emphasis on shared values,
- empirical in its grounding in flourishing science,
- democratic in its commitment to inclusion and equality,
- institutional in its focus on durable structures.

What contemporary democracy has lost—and what populism exploits—is a shared moral architecture linking personal flourishing with collective flourishing, and private WB with public purpose. ECD restores this lost architecture by reframing democracy as a value-generating moral ecology, rather than a marketplace of resentment or a procedurally neutral arena. In this sense, ECD is not merely a normative proposal but the institutional and ethical form of value ecology: a system in which meaning, recognition, and relational solidarity become enduring public goods. Because it rebuilds the experiential foundations on which democratic legitimacy rests, ECD provides a plausible exit from resentment-driven populism and enables a new form of ethical middle politics. By transforming the emotional economy of democratic life, ECD functions as the public philosophy that rescues democracy from populism and reorients political competition toward the shared flourishing of all.

8. Conclusion: From populism to flourishing democracy – Toward a moral-existential theory of civic sacredness

8.1 The value–meaning nexus: Foundations of existential political psychology

This chapter contributes to the broader framework of integrative political psychology introduced in the empirical second chapter. Integrative political psychology seeks to overcome two major limitations of conventional approaches: the separation between positive and negative psychological processes and the disconnection between individual experience and social relational structures.

Building on this framework, the present chapter advances what may be called *existential political psychology*, focusing on the intersection of values, meaning, emotions, and well-being. In this perspective, meaning functions as the central nexus linking value orientations to the emotional and relational components of subjective well-being. When this existential nexus deteriorates, negative emotions such as resentment, anger, and anxiety may become politically mobilized, facilitating resentment-driven and existential forms of populism. Conversely, when meaning and multi-dimensional well-being are sustained through civic sacredness, democratic orientations and flourishing become more likely.

The starting point of this framework lies in the relationship between values and meaning. Values can be understood as normative standards that guide human judgment and orientation in the world. In classical philosophical traditions, values were often associated with fundamental ideals such as truth, goodness, and beauty, as articulated in the Platonic tradition and later in Neo-Kantian philosophy. Associated philosophies have emphasized related normative ideals such as the sacred, which provides moral orientation and existential significance for human life.

Meaning, in contrast, refers to the interpretation of existence grounded in values. Individuals do not experience values merely as abstract principles; values become psychologically and socially consequential when they are translated into meaningful interpretations of one's life and social world. Meaning, therefore, functions as the existential nexus linking value orientations and lived experience, forming what may be described as the *value–meaning nexus*.

Meaning is also closely connected to the structure of the multi-dimensional WB. Rather than treating well-being as a single psychological state, the present framework views well-being as a composite structure comprising emotional experiences, relational life, and eudaimonic aspects of human functioning. This structure broadly corresponds to the PERMA model proposed in positive psychology [34], which includes Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement.

In the present framework described in the second paper, multi-dimensional WB includes three interrelated dimensions: emotional states (positive and negative affect), relational well-being (including mattering and belonging), and eudaimonic well-being (including engagement, achievement, and personal growth). Meaning operates both as one component of this structure and as an organizing center connecting these dimensions. Emotional experiences, human relationships, and eudaimonic pursuits acquire coherence when they are interpreted through meaningful narratives about one's life and values.

Meaning, therefore, plays a dual role. On the one hand, it is a dimension of well-being within the broader PERMA-related structure. On the other hand, it serves as the existential nexus that links value orientations to the emotional and relational components of well-being.

Taken together, these relationships between values and multi-dimensional well-being, including meaning and emotions, form the foundation of what may be called *existential political psychology*. Unlike conventional political psychology, which often focuses primarily on discrete emotions such as anger or fear, existential political psychology emphasizes the deeper structure through which normative orientations and interpretations of life shape emotional and relational experiences. Political attitudes and behaviors thus emerge not only from immediate emotional reactions but from the broader existential configuration linking value orientations, meaning, and well-being.

This perspective also provides the conceptual foundation for understanding populist mobilization. When the value–meaning nexus weakens, and multi-dimensional WB deteriorates, negative emotional dynamics—especially resentment—may become politically mobilized. These dynamics can generate resentment-driven forms of populism and develop into existential populism, in which political mobilization reflects deeper disruptions in values and multi-dimensional WB, including meaning. Conversely, when meaning supports relational and eudaimonic well-being, hope may sustain civic sacredness and democratic engagement.

Figure 5 summarizes this theoretical framework.

Meaning functions as the nexus linking value orientations to multi-dimensional WB, including emotional, relational, and eudaimonic dimensions. Through

The Existential Political Psychology Model

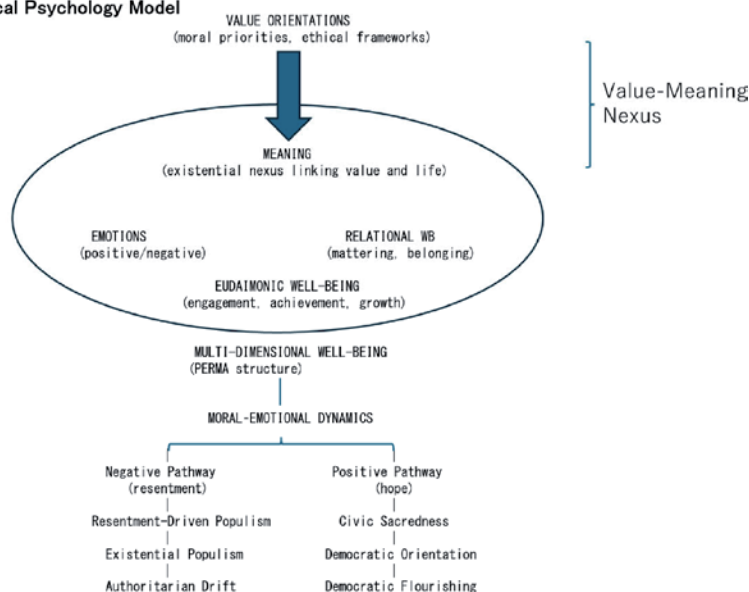


Figure 5.
 The existential political psychology model: A psychological mechanism of populist mobilization.

moral-emotional dynamics, this structure can generate divergent political trajectories ranging from resentment-driven populism to democratic flourishing.

8.2 The existential populism model: Emotion, meaning, and civic sacredness

The tensions between democratic equality and social hierarchy have long been recognized in political thought. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, democratic societies face the danger that increasing individual isolation may gradually erode civic bonds, leaving citizens politically passive and vulnerable to what he famously described as “soft despotism” [10–12]. Contemporary scholarship has conceptualized similar dynamics through the framework of populism [3, 4].

Building on the framework of existential political psychology developed in the preceding section, the empirical findings presented in this chapter can be synthesized into what may be called the *Existential Populism Model*. This model explains populist mobilization as a psychological process linking existential meaning structures, emotional dynamics, sacredness orientations, and political alignment.

In the present analysis, existential populism refers specifically to the psychological mechanism underlying *resentment-driven forms of populism* identified in the Japanese evidence, rather than to populism in general. The model, therefore, focuses on how resentment-based populist mobilization emerges from disruptions in existential meaning structures.

Rather than viewing populism primarily as a product of economic grievances or ideological polarization, the existential populism model situates populist mobilization within the deeper psychological structure connecting value-meaning and multi-dimensional WB. When the value-meaning nexus weakens and existential meaning structures deteriorate, emotional and moral dynamics can emerge that reshape political orientations.

The model consists of three interconnected components.

First, existential meaning structures. Individuals differ in the degree to which they experience life as meaningful, coherent, and purposive. When existential meaning is relatively strong, individuals tend to exhibit greater psychological stability and openness toward pluralistic democratic norms. Meaning provides an interpretive framework that integrates values, emotional experiences, and social relationships into a coherent narrative of life. Conversely, when meaning structures erode, individuals may experience an existential vacuum. This condition increases the demand for symbolic and moral sources of significance in the political sphere, making individuals more receptive to simplified narratives of identity, threat, and moral conflict.

Second, the emotional dynamics of resentment. Meaning depletion tends to generate a distinctive emotional configuration composed of anger, anxiety, and sadness. When these emotions converge, they form a structure of resentment that functions as a motivational engine of political mobilization. Resentment translates existential insecurity into narratives of blame, perceived injustice, and threat perception. Through this process, emotional experiences become moralized and politically charged, transforming personal dissatisfaction into collective political antagonism.

Third, sacredness orientation and political alignment. The emotional dynamics of resentment shape how individuals orient themselves toward moral order and collective identity. The Japanese evidence suggests that sacredness can take two distinct forms. One is authoritarian sacredness, characterized by purity, hierarchy, and exclusion, which tends to support far-right populism. The other is civic sacredness, grounded in dignity, recognition, and ethical transcendence, which supports democratic openness and resilience. These contrasting orientations illustrate how emotional dynamics can influence the moral frameworks through which individuals interpret political life.

Taken together, these three components describe a causal sequence in which *existential meaning structures shape emotional dynamics, which in turn orient sacredness and ultimately influence political outcomes*. In this sense, existential populism should be understood as the *psychological mechanism underlying resentment-driven populism*, rather than as a general explanation for all varieties of populism.

Within the broader theoretical architecture of this chapter, the existential populism model occupies an intermediate position linking *existential political psychology*, which analyzes the value–meaning foundations of well-being, and the *civic sacredness model of democratic renewal*, which addresses the normative reconstruction of democratic life.

Taken together, these three theoretical levels—existential political psychology, the existential populism model, and the civic sacredness model—form an integrated framework for understanding both the psychological origins of populist mobilization and the moral–existential foundations of democratic resilience.

Figure 5 illustrates this theoretical structure by linking the value–meaning nexus, multi-dimensional WB, moral–emotional dynamics, and political outcomes.

8.3 Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (EMDD) as flourishing democracy (FD)

At the normative and empirical center of this study stands a single claim:

Democratic resilience ultimately depends on the moral–existential infrastructure of society: where shared values and meaning sustain civic sacredness, democracy endures; where they collapse, resentment and authoritarian populism emerge.

From hybrid populism to ethical communitarian renewal, the trajectory traced throughout this book suggests that democratic endurance depends not only on institutional safeguards but on the moral-existential foundations of collective life.

The preceding analyses have examined the populist challenge across diverse democratic contexts, tracing its institutional forms, emotional dynamics, and religious inflections. Across Europe, the United States, and Japan, populism appears not merely as an ideological deviation but as a structural response to democratic vulnerability. The Japanese case functions as an analytically clarifying context in which the underlying moral-existential mechanism becomes particularly visible.

The institutional dynamics of hybrid populism described in Chapter 1 can be more fully understood when viewed through the moral-existential mechanism developed in this chapter. Hybrid populism is not only an institutional configuration but also a symbolic and psychological process. Political leaders may embody and mobilize forms of authoritarian sacredness rooted in religious or civilizational narratives.

In the United States, for example, Donald Trump's political appeal has been closely linked to Christian nationalism and evangelical mobilization, which sacralize national identity, hierarchy, and cultural boundaries. In Japan, emerging nationalist politics have similarly drawn upon symbolic elements of State Shinto and cultural narratives that elevate the nation as a sacred community.

When resentment-driven populism among citizens interacts with such sacralized authority embodied by political leaders, hybrid populism can evolve into hybrid authoritarian tendencies. In this sense, the Existential Populism Model developed in this chapter provides the psychological mechanism explaining why hybrid populist systems—particularly in the United States and potentially in Japan—are more susceptible to authoritarian drift.

In sum, Hybrid authoritarianism emerges when resentment-driven populism from below converges with sacralized authority from above. Religious nationalism often provides the symbolic reservoir from which authoritarian sacredness is politically mobilized.

Against this menace to democracy, the empirical findings culminate in what may be described as the Existential Populism Model, linking meaning structures, emotional dynamics, sacredness orientations, and political outcomes. When shared meaning and WB decline, resentment emotions may emerge and be sacralized into authoritarian sacredness, fostering far-right populist mobilization. Conversely, when meaning and civic spirituality remain strong, civic sacredness can sustain democratic resilience.

Yet diagnosis alone is insufficient. If democracy is to endure, analysis must lead to reconstruction. Moving beyond populism is not simply about defeating populist actors; it requires addressing the deeper moral-existential conditions that render democracies susceptible to resentment-driven mobilization.

The empirical evidence presented in this study converges on a central insight: *Democratic resilience can be sustained by civic sacredness*—shared commitments to dignity, mutual recognition, and shared meaning that anchor pluralistic life and orient moral commitment toward inclusive solidarity. In this sense, the future of democracy depends not only on procedural arrangements but on the cultivation of sacred commitments compatible with pluralism.

Flourishing science provides an empirical vocabulary for diagnosing democratic vulnerability. It identifies measurable indicators such as meaning, mattering, hope, and civic spirituality that correlate with democratic resilience. By linking these

dimensions to political alignment, flourishing research expands democratic analysis beyond economic or institutional variables.

If flourishing science provides the empirical foundation for understanding democratic vulnerability, democratic renewal requires a normative framework capable of guiding reconstruction. Such a framework requires an *innovative public philosophy* that integrates the classical ethical and virtue tradition—from Plato and Aristotle to Lippmann’s public philosophy and modern communitarian thought (Etzioni, Sandel, Putnam)—with the insights of contemporary human flourishing science [31]. This integrative framework provides the normative foundation for Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD), a model of democratic renewal grounded in civic ethics, relational well-being, and a shared sense of civic sacredness.

Karl Popper famously warned that liberal democracy must remain vigilant against its enemies—dogmatism, totalism, and authoritarian closure. Yet openness alone does not generate meaning. A democracy may remain procedurally open while becoming morally hollow. The argument developed here, therefore, overcomes Popper’s insight: the contemporary danger facing democracy lies not only in closed ideology but also in sacralized resentment.

Within this framework, *ethical middle politics* represents a practical orientation for democratic renewal. Rather than eliminating conflict, it reorients political energy away from sacralized antagonism toward shared flourishing, echoing the Aristotelian idea of the Golden Mean guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

If authoritarian populism represents one contemporary enemy of democracy, democratic renewal requires a constructive response. This study, therefore, proposes *Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD)*.

ECD reconstructs democratic moral ecology by integrating classical ethical insights, communitarian relationality, and empirical research on flourishing. In this framework, democracy is not merely a procedural mechanism but a moral order in which values such as meaning, dignity, and relational recognition become public goods essential to democratic legitimacy.

While ECD provides the ethical foundation of democratic life, its implications extend toward a broader democratic horizon. Democracy cannot be understood merely as a procedural institutional arrangement but as a long-term ethical process oriented toward human flourishing. This broader horizon may be described as *the Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy*.

Inspired in part by the political theory of Masao Maruyama, the representative post-war political theorist in Japan, democracy can be understood simultaneously as an idea, an institution, and a movement [47]. From this perspective, democracy becomes a value-generating civic and institutional process through which shared moral commitments are continually formed and renewed. Because democracy unfolds across vertical governance, horizontal participation, and elevational ethics, its process is inherently multi-dimensional and everlasting. Thus, the democratic theory is *Everlasting Multi-dimensional Democracy (EMDD)* [48].

Moreover, the democracy should be sustained by multi-dimensional well-being, as the second chapter (Japan’s 2025 Populist Turn from Outside) demonstrates. Therefore, Everlasting Multi-dimensional Democracy (EMDD) is more richly expressed as *Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy*. Its abbreviation can also be EMDD, the same as that of Everlasting Multi-dimensional Democracy. The multi-dimensionality in Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy signifies both the three-dimensionality of vertical, horizontal, and elevational axes and multi-dimensional well-being.

Then, the Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy can be abbreviated also as *Flourishing Democracy (FD)*. Ethical Communitarian Democracy (ECD) represents the philosophical articulation of Flourishing Democracy (FD).

Taken together, Flourishing Democracy refers to Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy (*EMDD*), a democratic process sustained by meaning, recognition, civic spirituality, and multi-dimensional well-being. Ethical Communitarian Democracy represents the normative ideal of Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (*EMDD*). By integrating existential political psychology, civic sacredness, and value ecology, *EMDD* envisions a democratic politics capable of sustaining long-term human flourishing across generations. In essence, flourishing democracy represents the normative horizon of democratic renewal, while Ethical Communitarian Democracy (*ECD*) provides its philosophical model and Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Democracy (*EMDD*) its structural formulation.

8.4 Toward Ethical Communitarian Multi-Dimensional Democracy (ECMD): From existential populism to civic sacredness

Thus, the ethical foundation articulated through *ECD* and the broader flourishing horizon represented by *EMDD* point toward a comprehensive democratic framework: *Ethical Communitarian Multi-Dimensional Democracy (ECMD)*. *ECMD* may be understood as a form of *generative democracy*, in which democratic life functions as a *value-generating civic and institutional process* enabling the co-creation of dignity, relational recognition, and collective flourishing. In this sense, *ECD* and its expanded formulation *ECMD* represent the institutional articulation of the *moral-existential theory of democracy* proposed in this study.

The core relationship may be summarized simply:

Value-Meaning → Sacredness → Regime Orientation.

Where value-meaning erodes, resentment and authoritarian sacredness drive populist mobilization. Where value-meaning is sustained, civic sacredness supports democratic resilience.

The *Civic Sacredness Model of Democratic Renewal*, presented in **Figure 6**, illustrates how this moral-existential mechanism links the dynamics of existential populism to the possibility of democratic renewal by cultivating civic sacredness. In this sense, the figure summarizes the moral-existential theory of democracy proposed in this study.

The figure illustrates the moral-existential infrastructure underlying both democratic crisis and democratic renewal. When shared value-meaning collapses, resentment may be sacralized as authoritarian sacredness, fostering populist mobilization. Conversely, the cultivation of shared value-meaning supports civic sacredness grounded in dignity, recognition, and ethical transcendence. Civic sacredness sustains a value ecology that enables Ethical Communitarian Democracy (*ECD*), the broader horizon of Everlasting Multi-dimensional Flourishing Democracy (*EMDD*), and their integration within Ethical Communitarian Multi-Dimensional Democracy (*ECMD*).

The moral foundations of democracy have long been recognized in political thought. Tocqueville observed that democratic stability depends not only on institutions but also on religion and civic associations [10–12]. From this perspective, democratic renewal requires recovering meaning as a central dimension of democratic legitimacy.

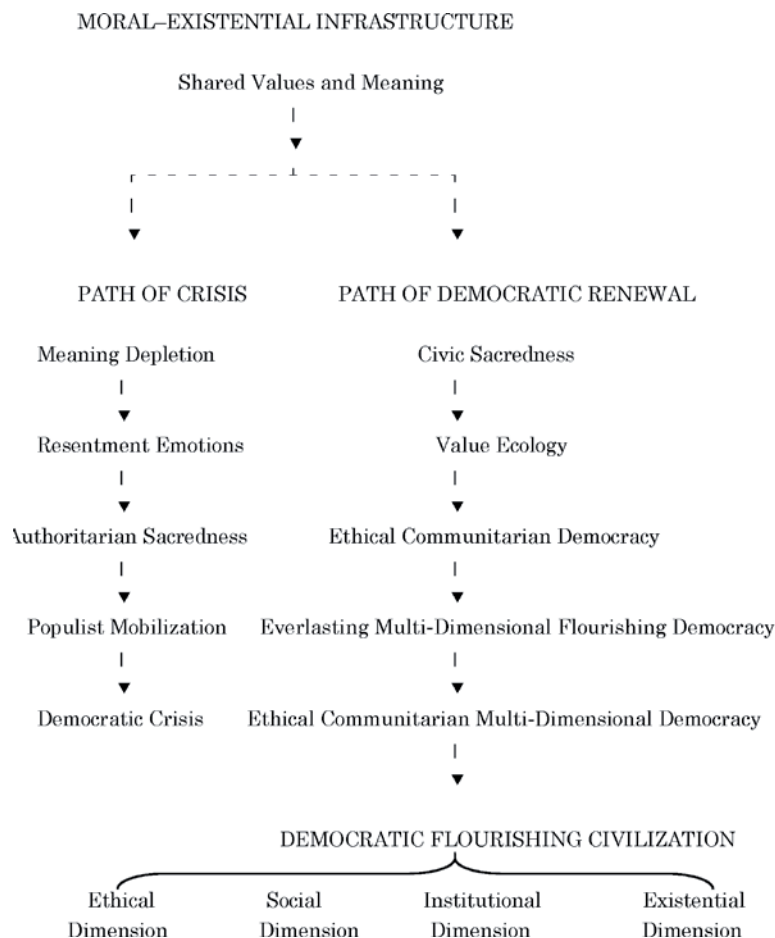


Figure 6.
From meaning crisis to civic sacredness: The moral-existential path from populism to democratic renewal.

The argument of this study may therefore be summarized in simple generative sequence:

Value-Meaning → Civic Sacredness → Ethical Communitarian Democracy → Multi-dimensional Democratic Flourishing.

Value-Meaning constitutes the moral-existential infrastructure of democratic life; civic sacredness expresses its ethical orientation; and Ethical Communitarian Democracy provides its political articulation.

In essence, the argument of this study may be summarized simply: *shared value-meaning generates civic sacredness, and civic sacredness can sustain democracy.*

To move beyond populism, democracies must reconstruct the moral-existential foundations that make civic life meaningful. In this sense, the challenge facing contemporary democracies is not simply how to resist populism, but how to move beyond it. Populism emerges when democratic societies lose the moral-existential infrastructure that sustains meaning, dignity, and recognition. Escaping the populist trap, therefore, requires more than institutional defense or ideological competition. It requires reconstructing the democratic value ecology. Ethical Communitarian Democracy represents such an attempt: a framework of civic sacredness and ethical

relationality can serve as the foundations of democratic life. Democracy, in this perspective, is not merely a mechanism of governance but a moral-existential political process oriented toward shared human flourishing.

To move beyond populism, democracies must reconstruct the moral-existential foundations that make civic life meaningful. Escaping the populist trap, therefore, requires more than institutional defense or ideological competition. It requires reconstructing the democratic value ecology.

The future of democracy may therefore depend not only on institutions or elections, but on whether societies can cultivate the civic sacredness necessary for shared human flourishing. In this sense, Ethical Communitarian Democracy constitutes the institutional and normative form of what this study ultimately envisions as *Everlasting Multi-Dimensional Flourishing Democracy (EMDD)*, a democratic process in which civic sacredness and multi-dimensional well-being sustain human flourishing across generations.

Flourishing democracy thus represents not only an institutional arrangement but a moral-existential horizon for democratic renewal. Moving beyond populism, therefore, requires reimagining democracy as a value-generating civic and institutional process grounded in civic sacredness and oriented toward communal human flourishing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

See **Figure A1**.

Meaning represents PERMA-M (calculated as the average of three items), and hope is measured using the original survey item. Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and

	Meaning	Hope	Care	Fairness	Spirituality	Post-materialism	Loyalty	Authority	Sanctity	Materialism
LDP	0.211**	0.243**	0.031*	0.047**	0.260**	0.003	0.128**	0.208**	0.208**	0.179**
Komeito	0.190**	0.215**	0.073**	0.103**	0.271**	0.012	0.109**	0.201**	0.206**	0.105**
Ishin	0.232**	0.253**	0.026†	0.004	0.254**	0.078**	0.164**	0.204**	0.192**	0.205**
DPFP	0.209**	0.210**	0.061**	0.056**	0.231**	0.080**	0.164**	0.198**	0.202**	0.261**
CDP	0.241**	0.253**	0.127**	0.108**	0.269**	0.184**	0.132**	0.119**	0.120**	0.119**
SDP	0.200**	0.216**	0.041**	0.014	0.266**	0.102**	0.094**	0.129**	0.151**	0.066**
JCP	0.159**	0.169**	0.045**	0.015	0.217**	0.092**	0.077**	0.111**	0.137**	0.035*
Reiwa	0.151**	0.156**	0.052**	0.025†	0.226**	0.083**	0.094**	0.122**	0.159**	0.082**
Hoshutō	0.164**	0.173**	0.014	0.019	0.235**	0.011	0.141**	0.212**	0.248**	0.205**
Sanseitō	0.162**	0.173**	0.007	0.008	0.232**	0.016	0.154**	0.215**	0.258**	0.208**

**: $p \leq 0.01$, *: $p \leq 0.05$, †: $p \leq 0.1$

Note: The table reports Pearson correlation coefficients between party support (measured on a 10-point scale) and value orientations.

Figure A1.

Correlations between value orientations and party support in Japan.

Sanctity are derived from the Moral Foundations framework developed by Jonathan Haidt and colleagues. Spirituality is measured using the VIA Character Strengths scale developed by Martin E. P. Seligman and collaborators. Materialism and post-materialism are based on survey items developed by Ronald Inglehart and colleagues.

Columns are arranged to highlight two broad value clusters: Meaning and hope represent existential orientation variables. While the remaining indicators capture civic prosocial values (care, fairness, spirituality, post-materialism) and order–identity values (loyalty, authority, sanctity, materialism). This structure illustrates the contrasting value configurations associated with civic sacredness and existential populism, as discussed in the main text.

Detailed descriptions of the questionnaire items and indicator construction are provided in the supplementary materials of the second paper “Supplementary Materials for: Japan’s 2025 Populist Turn from Outside” (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18787303>), particularly Appendix C, “Sources and Classification of Well-Being Indicators.”

Author details

Masaya Kobayashi^{1*} and Hirotaka Ishikawa²

1 Graduate School of Social Sciences, Chiba University, Japan

2 Doctoral Program, Graduate School of Humanities and Studies on Public Affairs, Chiba University, Japan

*Address all correspondence to: masaya_kobayashi@nifty.com

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*Edited by Masaya Kobayashi,
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The Populist Challenge - Democracy and Its Enemies offers a timely and provocative analysis of the deepening crisis of liberal democracy in an age marked by the authoritarian turn and post-liberal uncertainty. Bringing together contributions spanning Western Europe, the United States, Japan, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe, this edited volume develops a genuinely global perspective that bridges regionally grounded case studies with broader theoretical and normative inquiry. Structured around a trajectory from democratic destabilization, through processes of illiberal transformation, to the prospects for democratic renewal, the book demonstrates that liberal democracy now faces systemic challenges from multiple “enemies,” both internal and external—including authoritarian tendencies, hybrid and neo-fascist formations, and the erosion of democratic norms evident in developments such as the Trump administration and wider global crises. It breaks new ground in populism studies by extending the field beyond its traditional Euro-American focus, advancing the analysis of non-Western populisms, while also reinterpreting Western cases through new comparative lenses. A distinctive contribution is its innovative, context-sensitive typology of populism, including outsider and insider populism and their hybrid forms, developed across multiple chapters and applied to diverse national settings, such as Japan and Indonesia. Across these analyses, the volume highlights underlying forces such as the depletion of well-being (WB) and values, corruption, and the often-overlooked moral and religious dimensions of political life, including dynamics of authoritarian and civic sacredness. Integrating empirical research with normative theory, this book engages with positive political psychology and well-being studies to explain democratic vulnerability and resilience. Building on this foundation, it advances Ethical Communitarian Democracy, or flourishing democracy, as a pathway beyond the limits of contemporary liberalism. By combining global scope, regional depth, and conceptual innovation, this volume not only explains the present crisis but also opens new frontiers in the study and renewal of democracy.

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