

Analyzing Donald Trump's First Term: Populism, Polarization and a Threat to Democracy

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Introduction

The United States of America is the Democratic Hegemon of the world, according to (The Geostrata 2022). With this title, it is the country's obligation to stay loyal to democratic ideals, and steer away from those that undermine these key values. According to Varieties of Democracy, populism can be defined as:

“the condition of use by the representatives of a party of rhetoric strictly defined as populist, considering two different components: anti-elitism, referring to the resort to rhetoric contrary to those relatively small groups that have more voice than others in a society due to their political, economic power or their social position; and by the centralization of the discourse in the people, as long as the party leaders ‘glorify’ the common people—considered as a homogeneous entity, alien to divergent social interests and values and with a unified political will that must guide political action. —, identify with it and supposed to represent it.” (Peña 2023)

With this definition, political scientists can evaluate leaders across the world to determine whether their actions and verbiage can be constituted as populism, and whether that populism is harmful to democratic principles. In 2024, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, and with this, there has been lots of conversation on where he will take the country and even the world in the next four years. Donald Trump's populist rhetoric and actions during his first term of presidency contributed to polarization and posed significant threats to democratic institutions, particularly by undermining the Rule of Law, spreading misinformation, and refusing to accept electoral defeat.

Early Warnings

In analyzing Donald Trump's first term of presidency under the definition of populism, it is incredibly relevant to acknowledge the warnings that the Federalists left for the American people. In Article One of the Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton writes:

“...it will be equally forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that, in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interest can never be separated; and that a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.” (Hamilton 2019)

Here, Hamilton offers a clear warning for the people of the United States against tyranny. He explains that government power and citizen's involvement go hand in hand in that government maintaining their protections. If Americans blindly elect presidents that offer a bold personality, though do not do their job to protect liberties laid out in the Constitution, he says that Americans are in danger. He goes further to say that leaders will attempt to take away freedoms in exchange for personality, resulting in a tyrannical government that Americans worked hard to separate from. Looking at the Federalist Paper Article One, it is clear from a retrospective approach that Donald Trump is the kind of leader that Hamilton was warning Americans against electing.

Defining Populism: Trump's Rhetoric and Style

Populism is not solely a right or left winged issue, as some models demonstrate, though no matter where it falls on the political spectrum, all populism contains the same few qualifiers.

As Jeremiah Morelock (2018) writes, “Populism challenges the parliamentary model (and occasionally the market model as well) by suggesting that legislative representatives not only fail to adequately represent the interests of their constituents (the people) but work to undermine them”. Populist leaders, like Donald Trump strategically separate their followers from the “corrupt elite” by creating a clear divide through language. Trump often uses words in his speeches like “patriots” or “woke-ness” to classify different groups of people. His insinuations are that the patriots are defending their country from the woke ideology that the democratic party holds. These classifications are direct separations of two groups of people, which divides the country. The division between groups makes it so that there is no circumstance where patriots could be considered woke, because patriots are fighting against the woke-ness. The separation of individuals, especially the woke government against the hard working American patriots, brings forth the first step of populism.

When announcing his campaign on June 16, 2015, Trump began building a following through his bold statements projecting ways that he will work for the American people, against the current government that is not working in their favor. In his Presidential Campaign Announcement speech, Trump says, “When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let’s say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time” (TIME Staff 2015). Here, the use of “I” to represent a powerful action over another country shows that Trump believes that only he is capable of helping the American people overcome the challenge of defeating China. The generalization of China killing “us”, as in the American people, provides a direct comparison of the current administration being weak towards China, where Trump says he, personally, is not weak towards China. To continue he says, “When do we beat Mexico at the border? They’re laughing at us, at our stupidity” (TIME Staff 2015). Depicting Mexico as

laughing at the United States' stupidity implies that the current administration of the United States is taking actions that are not smart, further setting Trump apart from other government leaders. He uses the image of the United States being mocked on a global scale to show the American people the reality they are in under the current administration, to then directly provide an answer to this concern; his presidency.

Trump also uses the American people to contribute to his populist rhetoric, an example of this would be his Inauguration Day speech on January 20, 2017. The speech comes after Donald Trump's victory over Democrat, Hillary Clinton, with Trump getting 306 electoral college votes and Clinton receiving 232 (The New York Times 2017). ABC News (2017) highlights that Trump called for an investigation on opponent Hillary Clinton and the Democrats as a whole, as he claimed she was involved in email scandals and cannot be trusted as president for national security reasons. In his speech Trump says, "...today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People" (Trump 2017). In this quote, Trump clearly asserts that the American people have won against the Democratic party that was not serving their best interests. This assertion comes despite Barack Obama's approval rating being 59% when he left office in 2017 (Woolley and Peters 2017). These generalizations are harmful as they divide groups in the U.S. and they also bring forth the idea that Trump has been elected on behalf of the people to "fix" the government that he claims doesn't serve its people.

The definition of populism alone does not represent the harm that comes in backing candidates that represent extremist views. The unique element of Trump's presidency, is that he not only pits 'the people' against the 'corrupt elites' but additionally he pits social groups against each other. Trump overly portrays his political function as protecting the majority, which in his

case ends up being mostly Christians, or broadly demographics from minority groups, like nonwhite immigrants, LGBT community, etc. His placement of higher-status groups against lower-status groups is intentional and unique in dividing Americans, even among nonpartisans (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). The framework of Trump's rhetoric separates groups that he views to have harmful ideology apart from those that he believes are devoted and true Americans.

Threats to Rule of Law and Democratic Institutions

The Rule of Law can be defined by two categories: a narrow scope focusing on legal-procedural institutional aspects and a broader scope focusing on substantive attributes, like human rights protections (Natsika, Nord, and Lindberg 2025). The relationship between presidents and the United States Rule of Law is something that was abundantly clear under Donald Trump's first term. Nicola Lacey (2019) explains, "the Rule of Law depends on self-restraint, on the diffusion of a culture of respect for law, and on respect for the institutional integrity and independence of legal institutions, which it is impossible to fully embed within a constitution itself" (Lacey 2019). The Constitution cannot explicitly ensure that a president has the respect and care for American democracy and will have the best intentions for the country when taking office. An example of Trump undermining the rule of law in nearly every aspect was the January 6th Insurrection on the U.S. Capitol.

The insurrection began with Donald Trump losing to Joe Biden in the 2020 election. On January 6, the Vice President, at the time Mike Pence, ceremonially has the duty to certify the validity of the electoral college, certifying the winner of the presidential election. On January 6, 2021, Donald Trump told his supporters at a rally, "We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Naylor 2021). This verbiage insinuates a

threat to his supporters if they did not stand up for what they believe in, which is that Donald Trump should have won the 2020 election. In organizing a riot at the U.S. Capitol, Trump undermined the Rule of Law by sitting as active president and encouraging his supporters to attack based on false claims that the 2020 election was “stolen” from him (Naylor 2021). At 6:00 am on January 6th, Trump tweets, “If Vice President @Mike_Pence comes through for us, we will win the Presidency. Many States want to decertify the mistake they made in certifying incorrect & even fraudulent numbers in a process NOT approved by their State Legislatures (which it must be). Mike can send it back!” (Trump 2021). The populist rhetoric is clear, by putting the “fate of the country” in Mike Pence’s hands, at the order of Trump. Generalizing his supporters as “we” insinuates that Trump is one of the ordinary people, though he holds the power to work on their behalf as president. At 1:17 pm Trump tweets, “States want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt process never received legislative approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the States, AND WE WIN. Do it Mike, this is a time for extreme courage!” (Trump 2021). Here it is evident that the use of strong language to separate two groups of people, Trump’s supporters who believe the election was stolen from him, and Trump’s opposers who believe the election was valid and are determined to uphold the Rule of Law. As the current president of the United States, constituting government officials as corrupt and fraudulent shows another undermining of the Rule of Law. Stating that the election needs to be overthrown due to corruption, even though proven to be untrue, shows that Trump has no regard for the Constitutional duty of the election process in confirming the election results. Such behavior is harmful, as these practices are what ensure free and fair elections which are a key pillar of democracy. Lastly, at 11:01 pm, Donald Trump sends a final tweet, “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide

election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!” (Trump 2021). This conclusive tweet signals for Trump’s supporters to leave the Capitol, though he encourages his supporters to remember January 6, 2021, as a day of freedom and patriotism. He still fails to admit that the 2020 election was valid and the due process would continue, as Joe Biden would be his successor. Trump’s failure to step in quickly resulted in the death of five individuals (Healy 2021). This undermines the Rule of Law as the President of the United States should take action against those inciting violence on U.S. institutions, he especially should not be the one organizing such an event. The Rule of Law is a critical pillar to democracy. Donald Trump’s populist actions and support-base prove that with his leadership, violence could be incited to undermine that very Rule of Law that he should be protecting as President.

Effects of Populism on Polarization

Populism in Donald Trump’s first term has contributed to the polarized society that the United States citizens find themselves in today. As McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) explain, “We have conceptualized a polarizing society as one in which cross-cutting cleavages are flattened and a single boundary begins to divide societies into two camps, with political identities becoming social identities”. Trump’s rhetorical separation of “us” versus “them” to separate ideology and create a clear divide of citizens can be analyzed throughout his first term. A study from The Pew Research Center (2021) explains how Trump’s presidency divided Democrats and Republicans more than any incoming chief executive in three decades, before he even took office (Dimock and Gramlich 2021). Though the divide amongst parties did not begin during Trump’s first term, it escalated dramatically by the end. Polarization is derived from the ideological shifts that came with Trump’s first term and his campaign in 2016. An example of this is seen through

Rachel Kleinfeld's work (2017) explaining that the Republican party's views on the economy differed, but socially was mostly dominated by white men. With this, the strategy to target voters from the ideological perspective of an identity-based approach was an affective polarization strategy (Kleinfeld 2023).

McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) explain that when polarization becomes based on identity, where interests and identities are mutually exclusive and completely separate, democracy is at risk. When differences develop from political preferences to personal attacks, where coexistence is no longer feasible, it signals that governmental danger is near. Such separation where two political parties are not able to cross party boundaries to create bipartisan laws, governments as a whole can become gridlocked. The concern in the United States surrounding political polarization comes from the "us" versus "them" mentality, as mentioned previously, where Donald Trump supporters will go to lengths to protect their distorted views of democracy. The 2020 election was proven to be valid, though even in 2025 John Hopkins University (2024) reports that 65% of republicans in 2024 still do not accept the result that Joe Biden won the 2020 election. This harmful misinformation distorts the reality of voters, where instead of believing in their institutions of the United States, they believe the word of the person that claims he will "Make America Great Again". Polarization on either side of the political spectrum is harmful because the more polarized a society becomes, the more willing either side becomes to tolerate undemocratic behaviors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2020). Donald Trump's supporter's reliance on the misinformation being given to them is a direct example of harmful polarization that can be hard to see through when the other side of the political spectrum is being framed in a way that one views as dangerous and harmful.

Democratic Backsliding and Populism

Democratic backsliding is a clear result of Donald Trump's first term of presidency, as the Republican party allowed the checks and balances in the United States institutions to be overlooked, tolerating authoritarian behaviors. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2020) state that for this reason, Americans have historically had a lot of faith in our Constitution. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2020) also share that a 1999 survey found that 85% of Americans believed that our strong Constitution was the main reason that the United States' democracy was so strong. After the election of Trump, that number is surely different. His strong support and overall presence in the United States government has found ways to undermine the Rule of Law. Varieties of Democracy reports that the United States liberal index score fell from 0.83 in 2016 to 0.74 just a year later in 2017. The score hit its lowest point in 2020, reaching 0.72. Then after the election of Joe Biden in 2020, the liberal index score grew exponentially in just one year, reaching 0.75, which was higher than it ever reached during the first Trump administration (V-Dem 2023). It can be concluded concretely that under the Trump regime, democracy is in danger.

The United States is not the first, nor will it be the last country to succumb to democratic backsliding at the hands of a populist leader. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro led his country in the same direction, inciting an insurrection on their Capitoll, declaring election fraud when his party did not win reelection, which divided the country and caused democracy to backslide (Daly and Sadurski 2020). Bolsonaro was seen to show similar populist, far-right rhetoric that Donald Trump displayed. As Liz Mineo (2024) writes, "inciting fear and anger to reach out to the rich and the poor alike, and like Trump, Bolsonaro promised to bring back order and law". She states that journalists even called Bolsonaro the "Trump of the Tropics". In the case of Brazil, under President Jair Bolsonaro, the country's liberal democracy index score fell from 0.66 in 2016 to its low of 0.54 in 2019 (V-dem 2023). The parallel between democratic backsliding in Brazil and

the United States can be seen in Figure 1, where the steady decline occurred for both countries between 2016 and their lowest point being during their populist president's term. Brazil's democratic backsliding began before his term as president, as President Rousseff was impeached leaving the country unsteady economically, which created an overall unhappiness from citizens. This led President Bolsonaro to build his far-right populist platform. He reminded citizens of a time when Brazil was protected from corruption under their former military regime (Hunter and Power 2019). The importance in the case of Brazil under President Jair Bolsonaro's populism in contrast to President Donald Trump's is that under both regimes, democracy backslid. This is harmful to countries as the ideology of mistrust in the government, unfair elections, and harm done to institutions is not something that can be restored immediately in any country. Over time, democratic backsliding can even cause liberal democracies to shift further back until they are in an authoritarian state, where rights are being violated and citizens have no control in their government. This harm is the exact element that Alexander Hamilton warned against in the earliest days of the United States democracy.

Conclusion

The ways in which Donald Trump undermined the Rule of Law in his first term, go against his obligation as President to protect The Constitution. His populism divides the American people by projecting their views past political alignment with a party into their human traits. This division causes harm to democracy as polarized citizens and in turn governments face gridlock when unable to find common ground for lawmaking. Trump's insurrection of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 shows that under his leadership, his support base is willing to inflict harm on America in order for their party to remain in power. The United States is not the first democracy to elect a populist leader and see democratic backsliding as a result. Alexander

Hamilton lays the foundation in Article One of the Federalist Papers where he warns the American people of misinterpreting strength for tyranny. Undermining fair and free elections, inflicting harm on U.S. institutions, and polarizing society are all seen through Donald Trump's first term, and are the exact actions that Hamilton warned against. With Donald Trump taking office for a second time in 2025, it is crucial that his first term be analyzed critically. Reflecting on the harm that Donald Trump did to democracy is imperative in understanding how Americans can protect it going forward into his second term.

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