Populism Unveiled: Mechanisms and Triggers of Political Violence

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Abstract: In recent decades, there has been a widespread surge of populism worldwide. Populists strategically utilize media platforms to highlight the suppression of ordinary citizens by political authorities and the perceived unethical behaviors of political elites. Populists, who employ political slogans advocating for the interests of the common masses and eliminating corrupt elites, have swiftly garnered widespread support. However, the ascent of populists to positions of authority has coincided with a notable increase in political violence. While scholars have extensively elucidated definitions and classifications of populism, and numerous theoretical studies have analyzed factors contributing to the emergence of populism in different geographical areas, there remains a shortage of unified comprehension regarding the mechanisms through which populism incites political violence. This paper investigates the various trajectories of political violence triggered by populism through a comprehensive literature review and comparative analysis. The study contends that political violence is incited by populism through two distinct pathways, as evidenced by an analysis of incidents occurring in various regions under populist regimes. The first pathway sees political violence initially prompted by the consolidation of power and the repression of political adversaries by populist leaders. The second pathway involves the xenophobic ideology of populism intensifies conflicts between native citizens and foreign immigrants, thereby heightening the likelihood of political violence.

Keywords: Populism, political violence, democracy

1. Introduction

Populism germinated in Europe in the mid-19th century and thrived through World War II and the Great Recession, which denoted a worldwide economic downturn in the early 1930s. The worldwide economic collapse during the Great Depression resulted in widespread discontent among the general population towards those in positions of authority. Hence, the Great Depression served as a significant catalyst for the emergence and growth of populism. This trend evolved from local populist events in the post-WWII period, exemplified by the emergence of movements such as the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) in Greece, to the mid-1990s when populism gained wider attention in Western Europe with the rise of political parties like the National Front (Betz) in France [1].

After 1990, populism began to spread globally, especially in Europe. Between 1990 and 2018, 44 populist leaders held executive positions in 33 countries [2]. The number of populists has surged fivefold, expanding populist influence not only in traditionally prevalent regions like Latin American,

Central and Eastern Europe but also in Asian and Western European countries [2]. In short, populism has experienced a global surge since 1990.

Populism has become a prominent research topic in political science. Existing literature predominantly focus on understanding the causes and effects of populism on democracies. In his article, Berman discusses the causes of populism in mature industrial democracies, including the United States and Europe [3]. He identifies three crucial explanations for the emergence of populism: demand and supply-side factors, populist rationales rooted in economic grievances and socio-cultural dissatisfaction, and populist explanations based on structures and institutions [3]. Bugaric delves into the contemporary political landscape, emphasizing the dominance of authoritarian populism [4]. By analyzing the relationship between populism and constitutional democracy, he highlights the challenges posed by authoritarian populism to constitutional democracy. However, Bugaric also suggests that some forms of populism, characterized by democracy values, freedom, and inclusiveness, can act as corrective for the shortcomings of constitutional democracy [4]. This nuanced perspective acknowledges both the potential threats and corrective influences that different types of populism may exert on democratic systems.

However, there is a notable gap in research concerning the causal relationship between populism and political violence. Throughout the world, regions with a robust populist flavor often witness the concurrent rise of political violence. Populist leaders, upon gaining power, frequently resort to violent means to eliminate opposition, while the influx of immigrants can intensify conflicts between native citizens, who feel their political status is declining, and foreign communities, potentially escalating into acts of violence. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the triggering mechanism of political violence by conducting a comparative analysis of instances of political violence triggered by populism in mature industrial democracies, especially the United States, and developing democracies, such as the Philippines and Turkey.

The study argues that there are two paths by which populism can cause political violence. In the first path, populism draws on the language of Manichaeism to homogenize the people into a pure and dynamic group, while portraying political elites as evil and corrupt. The anti-pluralistic nature of populism garners support from large masses, and populist leaders often employ performative political violence to eliminate opposition and solidify their political positions, even if it involves targeting innocent individuals in the process. The second path involves right-wing populists, who, with their ideologies rooted in xenophobia and the prioritization of their ethnic groups, win the support of native populations feeling a decline in their political status. When the migrant crisis grows, the native population, incited by right-wing populist ideology, is more likely to support the exclusion of foreign migrants through violent means.

2.   Definitions and Types of Populism and Political Violence

Reviewing existing literature reveals that the definition of populism can be divided into conceptualizing the term "populism" and understanding the phenomenon of populism. First of all, the conceptual understanding of populism requires treating it as an abstract object, a concept used to identify different but rather diverse referents [5]. At its core, populism is defined as the notion that political power belongs to the people and should be exercised as political sovereignty. In this context, the "people" need to have four essential attributes: being the majority in political life; forming a homogenized group; facing challenges to their political status; and possessing high moral values [5]. Based on this definition, populism can be understood at a minimal level as democratic illiberalism [5].

Building on this minimal definition of populism, Mulder further develops the conceptual meaning of populism. Mulder defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that sees society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt political elite. Politics,

under this ideology, should represent the universal will of the people [1]. Thin-centered ideology means that populism differs from "thick-centered" ideologies, such as socialism, as populists do not articulate their ideal world [1].

As a result, according to this definition, the central features of populism are monism and moralism. Monism views people as a singular entity, i.e., it does not differentiate between them based on different criteria such as religion, class, or race; every member share identical political needs and values [1]. Accordingly, populism is inherently anti-pluralistic. Moralism entails the belief in a moral difference between the people and the political elite. The people are depicted as honest, hard-working insiders, whereas political elites are often described as morally corrupt outsiders. Populists believe that the general will of the pure people opposes the ethically corrupt establishment elites [2]. Thus, populists elevate the conflict between insiders and outsiders to an urgent state issue by defining and delegitimizing outsiders [2]. The conceptualizations of populism focus on its feature, and additional literature delves into understanding the populist phenomenon. Mainstream definitions of the populist phenomenon include populism as a movement, populism as a strategy, and populism as a political culture [5].

The state is an institution with a legitimate monopoly on violence. If a society is filled with violence, it indicates that the state does not have an effective monopoly on violence. When the state lacks an effective monopoly on violence, the political order of a society is out of control. The disruption of political order is often related to a loss of control and the proliferation of violence. Violence is a physical attack against an individual or a group [6]. Of particular interest for study is collective violence. According to Tilly, communal violence is characterized by three features: immediate physical injury to an individual, involvement of at least two perpetrators, and a proportion of the accrual that is, at least partially, the result of collaboration among the perpetrators [7]. Political violence is a subject of collective violence that is politically related, motivated, and contains a clear political goal or intent [7].

3. Pathway One: Populist Violence

The first path by which populism triggers political violence involves the bloody repression of opposition and innocent civilians after populists come to power. Based on the definition of populism above, populist monism ultimately categorizes social groups into two homogeneous and hostile groups: the pure people and the corrupt political elite. Populists argue that politics should be the universal expression of the people's will. Still, today, politics has escaped the control of the people and has instead become the exclusive domain of the upper classes. Populism, thus, opposes any form of intermediaries, such as political parties, that exist between the people and those who make decisions. In particular, they advocate a more direct connection between the people and the decision-makers [8]. To strengthen this direct link, the typical method of populists is to introduce a leader with extraordinary charisma. This leader is not a member of the established elite of the establishment, but rather an outsider. He or she can engage directly with the people and act as a voice for their political interests [9].

At the same time, social media provides excellent support for the success of populist campaigns. Populist leaders can rely on a certain degree of "media complicity." In a situation where the media plays a significant role, news coverage tends to align with the preferences of the general public [10]. Populists ouster the established ruling class in their countries and align themselves with the concerns of the general population. They employ dramatic political rhetoric and boldly express collective desires and beliefs of the people, which captures the interest of the masses [10]. As a result, many media outlets compete to cover populist ideas. Backed by a homogenized group of supporters and a big media push, populist leaders are more likely to secure electoral victories. However, once in power, populists see the establishment elite and opposition in society as a threat to national security. As a

result, populists cleanse the opposition entirely by unleashing political violence, often taking the form of terrorism or massacres. Through violence, populist rulers hope to protect the state by removing harmful foreign influences and fighting potential enemies who are perceived to threaten the integrity of the imagined state and society [8].

Lurking beneath the incidents of political violence is the consolidation of populist rulers' political power. Particularly in countries with underdeveloped democracies, due to populists' lack of support from the upper classes of society and establishment elites, if citizens supporting populism realize that the policies enacted by their populist leader do not serve their political interests, the likelihood that these voters greatly diminish. To secure the continuation of their political positions, populist rulers then choose to win the loyalty of their people through performative political violence. The fear of losing power infuses political violence with an impulse that can override rational political considerations.

During the Philippines' protracted and violent elections spanning fifty years, Rodrigo Duterte, a populist leader, gained power after the deaths of the opposition figures. This authority simultaneously cultivates allegiance and guarantees political stability [9]. As the mayor of a remote provincial capital city, Rodrigo Duterte used a law-and-order campaign slogan, promising to violently target drug dealers, which sparked widespread popular enthusiasm and won the election by a considerable margin of six million votes [9]. However, when Duterte came to power, he launched a brutal anti-drug campaign in the city's slums, during which more than 7,000 illegal executions took place, and many victims were dumped on the streets of Manila [9]. This campaign served as a stepping stone for Duterte to consolidate his political power, as it not only targeted drug dealers but also eradicated his political opponents. In essence, Duterte harnessed populist ideology to attain power and unleashed gruesome and indiscriminate violence to manifest his authority.

Necro-politics in Turkey serves as another example of populist rulers suppressing opposition. Necro-politics denotes the politicization of death and the strategic use of narratives around blood, death, and martyrdom for everyday political purposes [11]. The AKP (Justice and Development Party), under Erdoğant's leadership, constructs a necropolitical narrative in a populist manner, arguing that the country as being in a life-and-death situation and can only be saved through the sacrifice of life [11]. This narrative became an excuse for suppressing and retaliating against the opposition. After a failed coup attempt against Erdoğan in 2016, the necropolitical narrative was used to criminalize the opposition [11]. Since the failed coup, Erdogan's administration has exiled or executed a significant portion of the civilian and military bureaucracy [11].

Even in the United States, where democracy is well established and its values are developed, there are examples of populist leaders consolidating their power through political violence [9]. During Trump's ascent to the presidency of the United States, his populist rhetoric included promises to fight terrorism with torture. Trump declared on Fox Newspaper that when these terrorists are captured, their families must be executed [9]. This illustrates that populist rulers, whether in countries with established democracies or those where democracy is already consolidated, often choose to demonstrate their power through performative violence, thus forcing the people to obey.

4.   Pathway Two: Hatred of Immigrants

The hatred of immigrants by native citizens supporting right-wing populism is the second path that triggers political violence. Populism has undergone a progressive transformation, resulting in the emergence of both left-wing and right-wing variants. In recent decades, there has been a noticeable increase in the endorsement of right-wing populism among the native citizens of different countries. The xenophobia and ethno-nationalism of right-wing populism are reflected in the political slogan "native citizens first" [13]. The nativist political stance argues that nations can only be inhabited by native citizens, and foreign immigrants threaten the homogenous nation-state [13]. Thus, right-wing

populism has garnered the backing of native citizens by capitalizing on their anxieties regarding heightened foreign immigration, cultural diversity, and discontentment with the gradual erosion of social standing and privileges for traditional native citizens.

As explained by intergroup threat theory, individuals face a wide range of social changes, pressures, and (perceived) threats respond by increasing their identification with the in-group and displaying hostility toward members of the out-group in society [12]. Gidron and Hall, through their analysis of cross-national survey data from 20 developed democracies, point out that social status anxiety is a primary cause of support for populism support, with lower social status correlating strongly with the backing for right-wing populist parties [13].

Certain scholars have specifically identified white anxieties about the growing diversity and empowerment of minority groups in the United States, as well as the consequent erosion of white racial dominance and privilege, as a contributing factor to the Trump vote in 2016 [14]. Consequently, native citizens who perceive themselves as having lower social status and less influence in political and economic matters are more prone to endorsing the use of violence as a method to expel and harm migrants. James examined the relationship between populism and support for political violence through a survey of primary data from more than 3,000 subjects in the U.S. [12]. The study found that populists were more likely to feel threatened by social change (socio-demographic change), and this sense of threat was positively correlated with support for political violence [12].

The immigration crisis exists between countries with different levels of democratic development. As the most prominent immigrant country in the world, the United States is home to 14% of the population, with approximately 470,000 immigrants living with or without formal authorization [14]. The influx of immigrants has challenged the economic and social status, as well as the political privileges, of native American ethnic groups. The election of Barack Obama, the first African American president in the United States, accentuated the shifting dynamics of national power resulting from this long-term demographic shift, leaving more white voters feeling dissatisfied and threatened [3]. Thus, resentment towards race, alien groups, and identification with the values of white supremacy were decisive factors in Trump's rise to power. When Trump took office, he claimed that nearly 180,000 illegal immigrants with criminal records were ordered deported from the country [15]. Trump specifically linked people's suffering to the growing number of legal and illegal immigrants to exacerbate the conflict between native groups and immigrants. As a result, a "white supremacy" demonstration broke out in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2017. Demonstrators chanted anti-immigrant slogans, leading to an escalation of the conflict that ultimately resulted in the death of one counter-demonstrator and the injury of many others.

Political violence by populists against immigrants has also erupted in the Philippines and Turkey, countries that are economically and culturally very different from the United States. In 2018, there were instances of anti-migrant street demonstrations in the city of Izmir, Turkey, in response to an unsubstantiated claim that a Syrian migrant had sexually assaulted a Turkish girl [16]. Protesters vociferated slogans on the streets to express their opposition to the presence of Syrian migrants in Turkey. They contended that the influx of migrants in Turkey had numerous adverse consequences on the indigenous population, including heightened rates of unemployment and crime [16].

In the Philippines, the deep-rooted anti-Chinese racism of Duterte, the populist ruler, has prompted him and his supporters to ostracize the Chinese community. In 2019, several Filipino residents staged a demonstration in Manila against Chinese immigrants, protesting against the massive influx of Chinese nationals into the Philippines and its impact on the local job market and housing market [17]. The demonstrators demanded that the government take measures to limit the number of Chinese immigrants and tighten regulations on them [17]. As a result, members of society who emphasize the supremacy of native groups are more likely to choose to use violent means to express their dissatisfaction with immigration policies.

5.   Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of mature industrial democracies and developing countries with unconsolidated democracies, this study finds that populist ideology coexists in countries with very different political economies and cultures. At the same time, political violence triggered by populism exists in these countries. There are two ways in which populist ideology begins political violence. The first involves populist rulers coming to power, consolidating their power and political positions through performative political violence to cleanse and suppress the opposition and even the innocent masses. This practice earns the populist rulers the loyalty of the people. Once in power, these populist rulers may continue using political violence as a typical means to govern in a high-handed manner.

In the second path, right-wing populism, with its ideology of xenophobia and emphasis on the priority of native citizens, gains support from the native groups, which are losing their privileges and socio-political status. Faced with changing socio-demographic structures, individuals tend to strengthen their political position by reinforcing social group identity and rejecting heterogeneous members of society. Thus, when a large number of immigrants of different ethnic origins are increasingly privileged, the likelihood of native citizens supporting right-wing populism using political violence against immigrants gradually rise. Whether in well-established democracies like the United States or in countries like the Philippines and Turkey, where the initial consolidation of democracy has been completed, the consolidation of political power by populist leaders and the hostility of native groups toward foreign immigrants are the two primary triggers of political violence.

By examining two highly differentiated groups of countries, this study shows a strong correlation between populism and political violence. Thus, the main contribution of this study lies in uncovering the causal mechanisms behind populism-induced political violence, which is conducive to identifying the adverse effects of populism on democratic constitutionalism in countries with different levels of democracy. However, the current study only considers a single independent variable, populism, when, in fact, the occurrence of political violence is often the result of the superposition of different independent variables. Future research on political violence should focus on the effects of various independent variables on political violence.

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