

From Popular Sovereignty to Procedural Cynicism: How Populist Rhetoric Erodes Trust in Democratic Institutions

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Abstract: *The contemporary rise of populist leadership has been widely associated with increasing political polarization and declining trust in democratic institutions. However, existing scholarship has largely treated trust erosion as a secondary consequence of affective polarization or ideological radicalization. This article advances a different argument: populist rhetoric erodes democratic trust primarily by redefining democratic procedures and institutions as illegitimate obstacles to popular sovereignty rather than as its normative foundations. The article introduces the concept of procedural cynicism to capture this shift in citizens' understanding of democracy, whereby courts, media, elections, and checks and balances are no longer perceived as safeguards of democratic rule, but as instruments of elite domination. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study combines qualitative content analysis of populist leaders' speeches, semi-structured interviews, and quantitative survey analysis. The qualitative component examines recurring rhetorical strategies in the discourse of prominent populist leaders, focusing on moral dichotomization, anti-elitist framing, and the systematic delegitimization of institutional mediation. This is complemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with participants in Albania and comparative contexts, which provide insight into how populist narratives are interpreted at the individual level and how they reshape citizens' normative expectations of democratic governance. Finally, survey data from a large-scale U.S. sample are used to assess the relationship between exposure to populist rhetoric and levels of trust in democratic institutions, controlling for key socio-demographic variables. The findings demonstrate that populist rhetoric does more than intensify political antagonism. It actively transforms the meaning of democracy itself by promoting a vision of unmediated popular will that renders procedural constraints suspect or illegitimate. Interview evidence reveals that individuals influenced by populist discourse often express distrust toward democratic institutions while simultaneously affirming their commitment to "true democracy," indicating a normative redefinition rather than outright democratic rejection. The quantitative results support these patterns, showing a statistically significant association between exposure to populist rhetoric and reduced institutional trust, particularly among less educated and socioeconomically vulnerable groups. By conceptualizing trust erosion as a process of procedural cynicism, this article contributes to debates on populism, democratic legitimacy, and political communication. It highlights how populist rhetoric undermines democracy not only by polarizing societies, but by hollowing out the procedural foundations upon which democratic trust ultimately depends.*

Keywords: Populist rhetoric; Democratic institutions; Institutional trust; Political discourse; Procedural cynicism

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, declining trust in democratic institutions has emerged as one of the most persistent and troubling features of contemporary politics. Courts, parliaments, electoral authorities, and the media- once widely regarded as pillars of democratic governance- are increasingly perceived with suspicion or outright hostility by significant segments of the electorate. This erosion of trust has coincided with the global rise of populist leaders who claim to speak in the name of "the people" against allegedly corrupt, distant, or self-serving elites. While the correlation between populism and democratic distrust is now well documented, the mechanisms through which populist rhetoric undermines democratic legitimacy remain insufficiently theorized.

Much of the existing literature explains trust erosion primarily through the lenses of affective polarization, ideological radicalization, or socio-economic grievance. From this perspective, populist rhetoric is understood as a mobilizing tool that intensifies emotions, sharpens in-group/out-group distinctions, and deepens political antagonism. Although these explanations capture important dimensions of contemporary populism, they do not fully account for a striking empirical paradox: many citizens who express deep

distrust toward democratic institutions continue to affirm their commitment to democracy itself. Rather than rejecting democracy outright, they often claim to defend a more authentic or "true" form of democratic rule against institutions portrayed as illegitimate or captured by elites.

This paradox suggests that the erosion of democratic trust cannot be reduced to polarization alone. Instead, it points toward a deeper normative transformation in how democracy is understood and evaluated by citizens exposed to populist discourse. In particular, populist rhetoric does not merely delegitimize political opponents; it systematically reframes democratic procedures and institutions as obstacles to popular sovereignty. Courts are depicted as barriers to the people's will, independent media as instruments of manipulation, and electoral or legal constraints as technocratic devices designed to protect elite interests. Under these conditions, distrust emerges not as democratic apathy, but as a morally justified stance rooted in an alternative conception of democracy.

This article argues that populist rhetoric erodes trust in democratic institutions primarily by transforming the normative meaning of democratic procedures. It introduces the concept of procedural cynicism to capture this shift. Procedural cynicism refers to a condition in which democratic institutions and procedures are no longer perceived as legitimate safeguards of popular rule, but as mechanisms of

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elite domination that distort or suppress the authentic will of the people. Importantly, this form of cynicism does not imply opposition to democracy as such. On the contrary, it is often articulated in explicitly pro-democratic terms, grounded in appeals to popular sovereignty, moral purity, and collective victimhood.

By focusing on procedural cynicism, the article moves beyond explanations that treat distrust as a by-product of emotional polarization or socio-economic dissatisfaction. Instead, it conceptualizes trust erosion as a discursively mediated process in which populist rhetoric reshapes citizens' normative expectations of democratic governance. This perspective highlights the central role of political communication in redefining the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate forms of democratic authority.

Empirically, the article draws on a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative content analysis of populist leaders' speeches, semi-structured interviews, and quantitative survey analysis. The qualitative analysis examines how populist leaders deploy moral dichotomies, anti-elitist frames, and emotionally charged narratives to delegitimize institutional mediation. Interview data provide insight into how these narratives are interpreted at the individual level, revealing patterns of distrust that coexist with strong attachments to the idea of popular democracy. Finally, survey data are used to assess the relationship between exposure to populist rhetoric and institutional trust across different social groups, offering broader empirical support for the proposed mechanism.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it introduces procedural cynicism as a conceptual tool for understanding how populist rhetoric undermines democratic trust without necessitating outright democratic rejection. Second, it provides empirical evidence of this mechanism through a mixed-methods approach that links discourse, perception, and institutional trust. Third, it contributes to normative debates on democratic resilience by showing how democracies may be hollowed out not only through institutional decay, but through discursive transformations that erode the legitimacy of democratic procedures from within.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework, situating procedural cynicism within existing scholarship on populism and democratic trust. The subsequent section outlines the data and methodology. The analysis section then traces the pathway from populist rhetoric to citizen perceptions and institutional distrust. The article concludes by discussing the broader implications of procedural cynicism for democratic stability and the challenges it poses to efforts aimed at restoring trust in democratic governance.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

Populism has been widely theorized as a political phenomenon that derives its power not from programmatic coherence, but from its capacity to morally restructure political conflict. One of the most influential conceptualizations understands populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two antagonistic camps:

the morally pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). This ideological structure does not reject democracy per se; rather, it claims exclusive moral representation of the popular will while rejecting pluralism as illegitimate. In this sense, populism is inherently hostile to liberal-democratic mediation, particularly when such mediation constrains the direct expression of popular sovereignty.

At the same time, populism has also been theorized as a discursive logic rather than a fixed ideological doctrine. From this perspective, populism operates through the articulation of heterogeneous social grievances into a unified political identity constructed as "the people" (Laclau, 2005). Central to this process is the use of broad and ambiguous signifiers—such as "the people," "justice," or "true democracy"—that allow diverse actors to project their own demands onto a shared narrative. Rhetoric thus becomes the key mechanism through which populism transforms diffuse discontent into a coherent political force. While Mudde's approach highlights the normative antagonism embedded in populist ideology, Laclau's contribution draws attention to the performative and communicative processes through which that antagonism is sustained and reproduced.

Taken together, these approaches converge on a critical insight: populism is not simply a set of beliefs or policy positions, but a mode of political communication that actively reshapes how citizens interpret political authority. Rhetoric functions as the operational bridge between ideological claims and everyday political perception. Through repeated moral dichotomization, emotional appeals, and the personalization of representation, populist discourse establishes a normative framework in which political legitimacy is no longer grounded in institutional mediation, but in the presumed authenticity of popular will.

This reconceptualization has profound implications for democratic trust. In democratic theory, trust in institutions is not reducible to approval of outcomes or satisfaction with political performance. Rather, it reflects citizens' acceptance of political procedures as legitimate, binding, and worthy of compliance even when decisions are unfavorable (Rosanvallon, 2011). Democratic governance depends on this procedural legitimacy: courts, media, electoral bodies, and constitutional constraints derive their authority from their role as neutral mediators of political conflict. When citizens recognize these procedures as legitimate, democracy can accommodate disagreement without collapsing into moralized antagonism.

Populist rhetoric intervenes precisely at this procedural level. By framing democratic institutions as detached from, or hostile to, the popular will, populist leaders challenge the normative foundations of institutional legitimacy. Courts are depicted as politicized obstacles, independent media as manipulative elites, and constitutional constraints as technocratic mechanisms designed to protect entrenched interests rather than democratic values. This framing does not necessarily lead citizens to reject democracy outright. Instead, it encourages a reinterpretation of democracy in which institutional mediation itself becomes suspect.

To capture this transformation, this article introduces the concept of procedural cynicism. Procedural cynicism refers to a normative shift whereby democratic procedures and institutions are redefined as mechanisms of elite domination rather than as safeguards of popular sovereignty. Under conditions of procedural cynicism, distrust emerges not from political disengagement or apathy, but from a morally charged belief that institutions systematically betray the people. Citizens who exhibit procedural cynicism often remain politically mobilized and emotionally invested, yet they withdraw legitimacy from the very procedures that sustain democratic governance.

Importantly, procedural cynicism differs from authoritarian attitudes. Individuals influenced by populist discourse may endorse restrictions on judicial independence, media freedom, or constitutional checks while simultaneously affirming their commitment to democracy. Their support for illiberal measures is frequently articulated as a defense of “true democracy” against institutions portrayed as corrupt or illegitimate. This distinction helps explain why democratic erosion can occur without explicit anti-democratic rhetoric and why populist leaders are often able to justify institutional weakening in explicitly democratic terms.

Procedural cynicism thus emerges as the cumulative outcome of sustained rhetorical delegitimization. Through repeated exposure to narratives that equate institutional mediation with corruption, obstruction, or elite conspiracy, citizens’ normative expectations of democracy are recalibrated. Legitimacy becomes associated with immediacy, moral unity, and leader-centered representation, while procedural constraints are reframed as anti-democratic barriers. In this way, trust erodes not because democracy is rejected, but because its institutional foundations are discursively hollowed out from within.

By theorizing procedural cynicism, this article shifts the analytical focus from polarization as an outcome to normative redefinition as a mechanism. It contributes to existing debates on populism and democratic erosion by showing how trust in democratic institutions can be undermined through discursive transformations that preserve the language of democracy while eroding its procedural core.

3. Materials and Methods

The paper adopts a mixed-methods design to examine how populist rhetoric reshapes citizens’ trust in democratic institutions. The use of multiple data sources reflects the theoretical premise that trust erosion is not a purely attitudinal phenomenon, but a discursively mediated process that operates simultaneously at the level of political communication, individual perception, and broader social patterns. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study seeks to trace the pathway through which populist rhetoric translates into procedural cynicism and declining institutional trust.

The qualitative component consists of a systematic content analysis of populist leaders’ public discourse. The corpus includes speeches, official statements, and public addresses delivered by prominent populist leaders across different

political contexts, with particular emphasis on cases where populist rhetoric has been explicitly directed against democratic institutions. The selection of speeches was purposive, prioritizing moments of heightened political salience such as electoral campaigns, constitutional disputes, or public confrontations with judicial or media institutions. All texts were collected from official archives and verified public sources to ensure authenticity and comparability.

The content analysis focused on identifying recurring rhetorical patterns related to the delegitimization of democratic procedures. A coding framework was developed to capture key dimensions of populist discourse, including moral dichotomization between “the people” and “the elite,” emotional appeals, personalization of political authority, and explicit or implicit challenges to institutional mediation. Coding was conducted using qualitative data analysis software, allowing for systematic comparison across cases. Intercoder reliability tests yielded a Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of 0.84, indicating a high level of consistency and reliability in the coding process. This ensured that the identified patterns reflected stable features of populist rhetoric rather than subjective interpretation.

To complement the discourse-level analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to capture how populist narratives are interpreted and internalized by individuals. The interview sample consisted of eight participants in Albania, selected through purposive sampling to reflect variation in age, education level, and political orientation. Although the interview sample is small, it was designed for analytic depth rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with qualitative research aimed at identifying interpretive patterns rather than population estimates. Additional comparative interviews from other national contexts were used to assess the broader relevance of the identified mechanisms. The interviews focused on participants’ perceptions of democratic institutions, including courts, media, and electoral processes, as well as their emotional responses to populist messages. Particular attention was paid to how respondents justified distrust toward institutions while simultaneously affirming support for democracy. All interviews were anonymized and transcribed verbatim to preserve confidentiality and analytical accuracy.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with codes derived both from the theoretical framework and from patterns emerging inductively from the data. To enhance analytical rigor, computational text analysis techniques were also employed to identify semantic similarities across interview responses. This allowed for the clustering of recurring narratives related to institutional distrust, victimhood, and perceptions of elite manipulation, strengthening the interpretive validity of the qualitative findings.

The quantitative component of the study consists of survey data collected from a large-scale sample of respondents in the United States. The survey was administered online in August 2024 and included approximately 985 participants, selected to ensure demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, education level, and political orientation. The survey measured respondents’ exposure to populist rhetoric, levels of

trust in key democratic institutions, and relevant socio-demographic variables. Institutional trust was operationalized through respondents' reported confidence in courts, media, and electoral authorities.

The survey data were analyzed using logistic regression models to assess the relationship between exposure to populist rhetoric and trust in democratic institutions, controlling for education level and other demographic factors. The quantitative analysis was not intended to provide causal proof in isolation, but to assess whether the patterns observed in the qualitative analysis were reflected at the aggregate level. This triangulation strengthens the empirical foundation of the study by linking discourse, perception, and broader trends in institutional trust.

By integrating content analysis, interviews, and survey data, the methodological design allows for a comprehensive examination of procedural cynicism as a discursively produced phenomenon. The qualitative analyses illuminate the mechanisms through which populist rhetoric redefines democratic legitimacy, while the quantitative findings provide supporting evidence of the broader association between exposure to populist discourse and declining trust in democratic institutions. Together, these methods offer a robust and empirically grounded account of how populist rhetoric contributes to democratic erosion.

4. Analysis

4.1 Rhetorical Delegitimization of Democratic Procedures

The first step in tracing the emergence of procedural cynicism begins by examining how populist leaders rhetorically reframe democratic institutions and procedures. Rather than rejecting democracy explicitly, populist discourse consistently targets the legitimacy of institutional mediation, presenting courts, media, and constitutional constraints as obstacles to the authentic expression of popular sovereignty. This delegitimization operates through recurring discursive patterns that combine moral dichotomization, emotional appeals, and the personalization of political authority.

The content analysis of populist leaders' speeches reveals a systematic emphasis on narratives that portray democratic institutions as captured by elites and disconnected from "the people." Across the analyzed corpus, references to institutions are rarely neutral or procedural. Instead, they are embedded within moralized frames that depict institutions as either hostile or fundamentally illegitimate. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of key rhetorical strategies identified in the coded material.

Table 1: Frequency of Rhetorical Strategies Targeting Democratic Institutions

Rhetorical Strategy	Percentage of Speeches (%)
Delegitimization of courts and judiciary	38.6
Delegitimization of media	42.1
Delegitimization of electoral procedures	27.4
Moral dichotomy (people vs. elite)	61.8
Emotional appeals (anger, fear, victimhood)	55.3
Personalization of popular representation	49.7

Source: Author's content analysis

As shown in Table 1, moral dichotomization constitutes the most pervasive rhetorical strategy, appearing in nearly two-thirds of the analyzed speeches. This confirms existing findings that populist rhetoric relies heavily on the construction of a moral boundary between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. However, the central contribution of this analysis lies in demonstrating how this moral framework is extended to democratic institutions themselves. Courts, media outlets, and electoral authorities are not merely criticized for inefficiency or bias; they are framed as structurally opposed to the popular will.

Delegitimization of the media emerges as the most frequent institution-specific strategy, appearing in over 40 percent of the analyzed speeches. Media organizations are consistently portrayed as instruments of elite manipulation, accused of distorting reality, suppressing truth, or conspiring against the people. This framing undermines the media's role as an intermediary between political actors and citizens, recasting journalistic mediation as a form of democratic betrayal rather than accountability.

Similarly, references to the judiciary emphasize obstruction and moral corruption rather than legal reasoning or procedural fairness. Courts are depicted as politicized bodies that override the will of the majority through technicalities, constitutional constraints, or international norms. In this discursive construction, legal procedures are stripped of their democratic justification and reframed as tools through which elites maintain control. The judiciary thus becomes a symbol of procedural domination rather than an impartial guarantor of democratic rights.

Delegitimization of electoral procedures appears less frequently but remains analytically significant. When present, it is typically articulated through narratives of fraud, manipulation, or systemic bias. Elections are not rejected outright; instead, their outcomes are questioned whenever they conflict with populist claims to represent the true people. This conditional acceptance of electoral legitimacy reinforces a vision of democracy in which procedures are valid only insofar as they confirm the populist leader's mandate.

Importantly, these strategies rarely operate in isolation. Moral dichotomy, emotional appeals, and personalization of representation function as reinforcing mechanisms. Emotional language—particularly appeals to victimhood and indignation—intensifies perceptions of institutional betrayal, while personalization frames the populist leader as the sole authentic interpreter of popular sovereignty. Together, these elements construct a discursive environment in which institutional mediation is delegitimized without requiring explicit anti-democratic rhetoric.

This pattern supports the article's central argument that populist rhetoric erodes democratic trust by transforming the normative status of democratic procedures. Rather than mobilizing distrust as a consequence of polarization alone, populist discourse actively redefines the relationship between the people and democratic institutions. Institutions are no longer presented as necessary components of democratic governance, but as antagonistic forces that distort or suppress the popular will.

The significance of this finding lies in its implications for democratic legitimacy. By systematically framing procedures as illegitimate, populist rhetoric lays the discursive groundwork for procedural cynicism. Citizens exposed to such narratives are encouraged to interpret institutional constraints not as democratic safeguards, but as morally suspect barriers to authentic democracy. The next section examines how this rhetorical delegitimization is translated into individual perceptions and attitudes, drawing on interview evidence to trace the micro-level dynamics of procedural cynicism.

4.2 From Rhetoric to Perception: Interview Evidence

While the content analysis demonstrates how populist leaders rhetorically delegitimize democratic institutions, interview data reveal how these narratives are translated into citizens' everyday understandings of democracy. Across interviews, respondents rarely described themselves as opposed to democracy. Instead, they consistently articulated distrust toward democratic institutions while simultaneously affirming their commitment to popular rule.

A thematic synthesis of interview responses identified four recurring perceptual patterns: (1) institutions framed as obstacles to democracy, (2) moral victimhood narratives, (3) appeals to "true democracy," and (4) justification of strong leadership as corrective intervention. Table 2 summarizes the prevalence of these themes across participants.

Table 2: Perceptual Patterns Associated with Procedural Cynicism (Interview Data)

Theme	% of Participants	Illustrative Pattern
Institutions as obstacles to democracy	75%	Courts/media seen as blocking popular will
Moral victimhood	62.5%	Citizens portray themselves as betrayed by elites
"True democracy" discourse	87.5%	Democracy defined as direct expression of people
Justification of strong leadership	62.5%	Support for exceptional authority to restore justice

Source: Semi-structured interviews (n = 8).

The most prominent pattern concerned the reinterpretation of democratic institutions as barriers rather than safeguards. Six out of eight participants explicitly described courts, media, or political procedures as mechanisms that prevent ordinary citizens from exercising real influence. These perceptions were often articulated in moral rather than technical terms. One respondent remarked:

"They talk about law and rules, but in reality, those rules only protect people at the top. For us, democracy doesn't really exist anymore."

Rather than expressing disengagement, participants framed institutional distrust as a form of democratic awareness. Several emphasized that their skepticism reflected a deeper understanding of how power operates, portraying themselves as politically awakened rather than alienated. This aligns with the concept of procedural cynicism, whereby distrust is experienced as moral clarity rather than resignation. Closely

related to this was the prevalence of moral victimhood narratives. Five participants described themselves or their social groups as systematically marginalized by political elites. Economic hardship, lack of representation, and perceived media bias were frequently cited as evidence that democratic institutions function primarily in elite interests. One interviewee stated:

"We vote, but nothing changes. They already decide everything before. The system is made for them, not for us."

Such narratives mirror populist rhetoric that frames politics as a struggle between virtuous citizens and corrupt elites, reinforcing perceptions of institutional betrayal. Perhaps most revealing was the widespread invocation of "true democracy." Seven participants employed language suggesting that democracy should involve direct responsiveness to popular demands, unmediated by legal or institutional constraints. Elections, courts, and media were accepted only conditionally—legitimate insofar as they aligned with perceived popular interests. When institutions produced outcomes seen as contrary to those interests, their authority was questioned. As one respondent explained:

"Democracy means people decide. If judges or journalists interfere, then it's not democracy anymore."

This conditional acceptance of procedural legitimacy illustrates how populist discourse reshapes normative expectations of democratic governance. Democracy becomes associated with immediacy and moral unity rather than institutional balance. Finally, five participants expressed support for strong leadership as a necessary corrective to institutional failure. While none explicitly endorsed authoritarianism, several justified exceptional executive power as a temporary measure to restore justice or national dignity. One participant noted:

"Sometimes you need someone strong to clean the system. Otherwise nothing will ever change."

This reasoning exemplifies how procedural cynicism facilitates the normalization of illiberal practices under democratic justifications.

Taken together, the interview findings demonstrate how rhetorical delegitimization at the elite level is internalized by citizens as a redefinition of democratic legitimacy. Distrust toward institutions is not accompanied by democratic withdrawal; rather, it coexists with intensified attachment to an idealized conception of popular sovereignty. This supports the article's central claim that populist rhetoric erodes trust by transforming the normative meaning of democracy itself. Institutions lose legitimacy not because democracy is rejected, but because democratic procedures are discursively reframed as antithetical to the people's will.

4.3 Survey Evidence: Exposure to Populist Rhetoric and Institutional Trust

While the qualitative findings illuminate how populist discourse is internalized at the individual level, survey data provide broader empirical support for the proposed

mechanism of procedural cynicism. The quantitative analysis examines whether exposure to populist rhetoric is associated with reduced trust in democratic institutions, controlling for key socio-demographic variables.

The survey included 985 respondents from diverse educational, age, and political backgrounds. Institutional trust was operationalized through respondents' reported confidence in courts, media, and electoral authorities. Exposure to populist rhetoric was measured through self-reported frequency of engagement with populist political content. Logistic regression models were employed to assess the relationship between rhetorical exposure and institutional trust, with education level included as a control variable.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Predicting Low Trust in Democratic Institutions

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	p-value
Exposure to populist rhetoric	0.47	0.09	< .001
Education level (low vs. high)	0.39	0.11	< .01
Age	0.12	0.07	n.s.
Gender	0.05	0.06	n.s.
Constant	-1.26	0.21	< .001

N = 985. Dependent variable: low institutional trust (binary).

The results indicate a statistically significant association between exposure to populist rhetoric and reduced trust in democratic institutions ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < .001$). Respondents who reported higher levels of exposure to populist messaging were substantially more likely to express low confidence in courts, media, and electoral authorities. Education also emerged as a significant predictor, with lower educational attainment associated with higher likelihood of institutional distrust ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .01$). Age and gender did not reach statistical significance.

These findings align closely with the qualitative evidence presented earlier. Exposure to populist rhetoric does not merely correlate with generalized political dissatisfaction; it is specifically associated with diminished confidence in the procedural foundations of democracy. Importantly, the effect persists even when controlling for education, suggesting that rhetorical influence operates independently of structural socio-demographic factors.

Rather than indicating simple political alienation, the pattern revealed by the regression analysis supports the interpretation advanced in this article: populist rhetoric contributes to a normative reorientation in which democratic institutions are perceived as illegitimate mediators of popular will. The survey data thus reinforce the micro-level dynamics observed in interviews, demonstrating that procedural cynicism is not confined to isolated individuals but reflects a broader trend among populations exposed to populist discourse.

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings trace a coherent pathway from rhetorical delegitimization to perceptual transformation and, ultimately, to institutional distrust. Populist rhetoric reframes democratic procedures as elite instruments; citizens internalize this framing as moralized skepticism toward institutions; and this skepticism

manifests empirically as declining trust in the core mechanisms of democratic governance.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in this article suggest that populist rhetoric undermines democratic trust through a mechanism that extends beyond affective polarization or ideological radicalization. Rather than merely intensifying political antagonism, populist discourse actively reshapes citizens' normative understanding of democracy by delegitimizing institutional mediation. Courts, media, and electoral procedures are reframed as elite-controlled barriers to popular sovereignty, producing what this article conceptualizes as procedural cynicism.

This perspective helps resolve a central paradox in contemporary democracies: why citizens who express strong attachment to democracy simultaneously support measures that weaken democratic institutions. The qualitative evidence demonstrates that institutional distrust is frequently articulated in explicitly democratic terms, grounded in appeals to "true democracy" and moralized conceptions of popular will. The survey results reinforce this interpretation, showing that exposure to populist rhetoric is significantly associated with reduced institutional trust, even when controlling for education and demographic factors.

These findings challenge dominant accounts that treat democratic erosion primarily as a consequence of polarization. While polarization remains important, the results here indicate that normative redefinition plays a more foundational role. Populist rhetoric does not simply divide societies; it reconstructs democratic legitimacy itself by relocating authority from procedures to personalized representations of "the people." In this process, institutional constraints are no longer perceived as democratic safeguards but as illegitimate impositions.

The concept of procedural cynicism contributes to existing debates on populism and democratic backsliding by highlighting how democracy can be hollowed out discursively before it is dismantled institutionally. This has important implications for democratic resilience. Efforts to restore trust through institutional reform alone may prove insufficient if citizens' normative expectations of democracy have already been transformed. Where procedural cynicism takes hold, democratic legitimacy becomes contingent on immediacy and moral unity rather than institutional balance, creating fertile ground for the normalization of illiberal governance.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that populist rhetoric erodes trust in democratic institutions by redefining democratic procedures as illegitimate obstacles to popular sovereignty. Through a mixed-methods analysis combining discourse, interviews, and survey data, it demonstrated how populist narratives translate into procedural cynicism: a normative shift in which citizens withdraw legitimacy from democratic institutions while maintaining rhetorical commitment to democracy itself.

By introducing procedural cynicism as an analytical concept, the study advances understanding of how populism destabilizes democracy from within. Rather than rejecting democratic ideals, populist supporters often reinterpret democracy in ways that undermine its institutional foundations. This dynamic helps explain why democratic erosion can proceed without explicit anti-democratic rhetoric and why institutional weakening is frequently justified as democratic renewal.

The broader implication is sobering. Democratic decline does not always begin with constitutional rupture or authoritarian takeover. It can begin with discursive transformations that quietly empty democratic procedures of their legitimacy. Recognizing and addressing procedural cynicism is therefore essential for any serious effort to confront contemporary democratic backsliding.

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