



# Populist Leadership and Political Polarization in Developing Regions: Examining Drivers, Public Perception, and Implications for Democratic Stability

Rizky Pratama Santoso<sup>1</sup>, Mekdes Alemayehu Tadesse<sup>2</sup>, Samuel N. Kairi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Haluuleo, Kendari, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Governance and Development Studies, Addis Continental University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

<sup>3</sup>School of Social Sciences and Development Studies, Papua New Guinea Pacific State University, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Correspondence: [rizkypratama@gmail.com](mailto:rizkypratama@gmail.com)

SUBMITTED: 11 March 2026; REVISED: 9 April 2026; ACCEPTED: 12 April 2026

**ABSTRACT:** The rise of populist leadership has become an increasingly prominent phenomenon in many developing regions, raising important questions regarding its implications for democratic governance and political stability. This study investigates the structural drivers of populist leadership, public perceptions of populist narratives, and the relationship between populism and political polarization in developing democracies. Using a mixed-method research design, the study combines quantitative analysis of secondary governance data with qualitative examination of political discourse and public opinion. Data were obtained from international governance indicators, public opinion surveys, policy documents, and political communication materials related to populist movements. The findings indicate that economic inequality, declining public trust in political institutions, and the rapid expansion of digital political communication significantly contribute to the rise of populist leadership. Public perception toward populist leaders is highly divided, with supporters viewing them as representatives of marginalized citizens and critics perceiving them as polarizing figures who challenge democratic norms. The study also finds that political polarization intensified through populist narratives can create both opportunities and risks for democratic governance. While populist movements may encourage political participation and highlight socio-economic grievances, excessive polarization can undermine institutional cooperation and democratic stability. Strengthening governance transparency and inclusive political institutions is essential to mitigate these risks.

**KEYWORDS:** Populism; political polarization; developing democracies; governance; democratic stability; political communication

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, populist leadership has gained significant momentum in many developing regions, becoming one of the most debated phenomena in contemporary political science.

Populism is commonly characterized by political rhetoric that frames society as divided between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” often promoting leaders who claim to represent the authentic will of ordinary citizens. These leaders typically position themselves as challengers of established political institutions, criticizing traditional political elites and promising to restore power to the people. While populism has historically appeared in various political systems, its increasing visibility in developing democracies has raised important questions regarding its impact on democratic governance, institutional stability, and public trust in political systems [1, 2].

In developing democracies, where political institutions are still consolidating and democratic norms are evolving, the emergence of populist leadership can significantly influence political dynamics. Many developing countries experience structural challenges such as economic inequality, limited institutional capacity, governance inefficiencies, and uneven access to political participation [3, 4]. These conditions often create dissatisfaction among citizens who perceive political elites as disconnected from public needs. Populist leaders frequently capitalize on these sentiments by presenting themselves as alternatives to traditional political actors and by emphasizing narratives that portray politics as a struggle between the interests of ordinary citizens and those of privileged elites. As a result, populism often becomes a powerful political strategy that reshapes electoral competition and public discourse [5, 6].

Several structural and socio-political factors have contributed to the rise of populism in developing regions. Economic inequality remains one of the most significant drivers, as disparities in income distribution and limited social mobility can intensify feelings of marginalization among large segments of the population. In many countries, economic growth has not been accompanied by equitable development, leading to perceptions that the benefits of globalization and modernization are concentrated among political and economic elites. These conditions create fertile ground for populist narratives that promise economic justice and greater political representation for marginalized communities [7, 8].

Another important factor is declining public trust in political institutions. Corruption scandals, ineffective governance, and limited transparency in decision-making processes have contributed to growing dissatisfaction with traditional political parties and government institutions. When citizens perceive that established institutions fail to address their concerns, they may become more receptive to leaders who promise radical reforms and challenge existing political structures. Populist leaders often exploit this environment by framing themselves as outsiders who are capable of confronting entrenched elites and transforming the political system [9, 10].

The rapid expansion of digital media and communication technologies has also played a significant role in facilitating the rise of populist movements. Social media platforms provide political leaders with direct channels to communicate with citizens, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. Through these platforms, populist leaders can disseminate simplified political messages, mobilize supporters, and frame political issues in ways that resonate emotionally with the public. Digital communication also enables the rapid spread of political narratives, sometimes amplifying grievances and reinforcing divisions within society. Consequently, digital media has become an important tool for political mobilization and identity formation in contemporary populist movements [11, 12].

One of the most significant consequences associated with the rise of populist leadership is the intensification of political polarization. Political polarization refers to the growing

ideological divide among political actors, parties, and citizens, often resulting in increasingly antagonistic political discourse. In polarized environments, individuals tend to align strongly with particular political identities while becoming less tolerant of opposing viewpoints. This dynamic can weaken democratic deliberation by reducing opportunities for compromise and consensus-building among political actors [13, 14].

In developing regions, political polarization may have particularly profound implications for democratic stability. Many developing democracies operate within fragile institutional frameworks, where political conflicts can easily escalate into broader social tensions. When populist rhetoric emphasizes divisions between “the people” and perceived enemies such as political elites, minorities, or opposition groups, these narratives can intensify existing social cleavages. As polarization increases, political competition may become more confrontational, potentially undermining the effectiveness of democratic institutions and policy-making processes [13, 15].

Despite these concerns, populism is not necessarily incompatible with democracy. Some scholars argue that populist movements can play a constructive role by increasing political participation and bringing attention to neglected social issues. By mobilizing citizens who feel excluded from political processes, populism may contribute to broader democratic engagement. However, the long-term implications of populist leadership remain contested, particularly when populist rhetoric leads to institutional conflict, concentration of political power, or erosion of democratic norms [1, 16].

Given these complex dynamics, it is essential to examine the drivers, public perceptions, and political consequences of populist leadership in developing regions. Understanding how populism interacts with socio-economic conditions, public attitudes, and institutional structures can provide valuable insights into its broader implications for democratic governance. Therefore, this study aims to examine the underlying drivers of populist leadership in developing regions, explore public perceptions toward populist narratives, and analyze the implications of political polarization for democratic stability. By analyzing socio-economic conditions, public attitudes, and political dynamics, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how populism shapes contemporary democratic systems in transitional political environments.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-method research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between populist leadership and political polarization in developing regions. The mixed-method approach was selected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, as populism involves both measurable structural factors such as economic inequality and governance indicators, and qualitative dimensions, including political narratives, public discourse, and perceptions of leadership. By combining these approaches, the study seeks to capture both the empirical trends and the interpretive context that shape the emergence and impact of populist leadership [1, 17, 18].

The methodological framework is designed to explore three key dimensions of the research problem: the structural drivers of populism, public perceptions of populist narratives, and the broader implications of political polarization for democratic stability. Quantitative analysis helps identify macro-level patterns in governance indicators, economic inequality, and public trust, while qualitative analysis provides insight into how political actors frame populist

narratives and how these narratives influence political discourse. The integration of these methods allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the dynamics between political leadership, public attitudes, and institutional outcomes in developing democracies [19, 20].

### *2.1. Research design.*

The study adopts a comparative analytical research design, focusing on selected developing countries where populist leadership has gained political prominence in recent years [2]. A comparative approach is particularly useful for examining populism because the phenomenon often manifests differently across political systems, economic contexts, and cultural environments. By comparing multiple cases, the research aims to identify both common patterns and contextual variations in the drivers and consequences of populist leadership.

The selection of cases was guided by several criteria. First, the countries included in the study are classified as developing or transitional democracies, where democratic institutions are still consolidating and political competition remains dynamic. Second, each selected case has experienced the emergence or strengthening of populist political actors during the past decade. Third, the countries demonstrate varying levels of economic development, institutional capacity, and political polarization, allowing for a more diverse analytical comparison.

Through this comparative framework, the study seeks to address three main objectives. The first objective is to identify the structural and socio-political conditions that facilitate the rise of populist leadership. The second objective is to examine how citizens perceive populist rhetoric and political messaging in different socio-political environments. The third objective is to assess the implications of populism and political polarization for democratic governance, particularly in relation to institutional stability, policy-making processes, and political participation.

### *2.2. Data collection.*

Data for this research were collected from multiple sources to ensure methodological triangulation and improve the reliability of the analysis. The use of diverse data sources enables the study to capture both macro-level trends and micro-level political narratives associated with populist leadership. First, secondary data from international governance databases were utilized to examine structural and institutional factors related to populism. Key datasets include the World Bank Governance Indicators, Freedom House democracy scores, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database. These sources provide quantitative indicators related to political freedom, institutional quality, corruption, democratic performance, and governance effectiveness. Socio-economic indicators such as income inequality, unemployment, and economic growth were also examined to explore the relationship between economic conditions and political attitudes. Second, public opinion survey data were used to analyze citizen perceptions of political leadership, trust in institutions, and attitudes toward governance. Surveys focusing on political trust, democratic satisfaction, and political participation provide important insights into how citizens respond to populist narratives and political mobilization strategies. These datasets help reveal patterns in public attitudes that may contribute to the rise or persistence of populist leadership. Third, policy documents, election reports, and political speeches were collected to analyze the discourse and communication strategies employed by populist leaders. These materials provide valuable information on how political actors frame issues such as corruption, economic inequality, and national identity in their narratives.

Election campaign materials and political speeches were particularly useful for identifying rhetorical strategies that emphasize anti-elite messaging or appeals to popular sovereignty. Finally, academic literature related to populism, political polarization, and democratic governance was reviewed to establish the theoretical and empirical foundation for the study. Scholarly works from political science, sociology, and governance studies were used to contextualize the empirical findings and support the analytical framework.

### *2.3. Data analysis.*

The collected data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. Quantitative analysis focused primarily on identifying patterns and relationships between structural indicators—such as economic inequality, institutional trust, and governance quality—and the emergence of populist political movements. Descriptive statistical methods were used to examine trends in democratic indicators, political trust levels, and socio-economic conditions across the selected cases. These statistical observations provide a macro-level overview of the structural environment in which populist leadership develops [1, 2]. In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine political discourse and populist narratives. Political speeches, campaign messages, and policy statements were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes and rhetorical patterns associated with populist communication. Particular attention was given to language that emphasizes the division between “the people” and “the elite,” as well as narratives that portray political leaders as defenders of national interests or representatives of marginalized communities. The study also applied comparative analysis to interpret similarities and differences among the selected cases. By examining multiple political contexts, the research aims to identify common drivers of populism while also recognizing the influence of country-specific institutional and socio-economic factors. This comparative perspective helps highlight how populist leadership interacts with political institutions and societal conditions in different developing regions.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *3.1. Structural drivers of populist leadership.*

The quantitative analysis indicates that several structural factors are closely associated with the rise of populist leadership in developing regions. Among the most significant drivers are economic inequality, declining institutional trust, and the expansion of digital political communication [2, 21]. Socio-economic data reveal that countries experiencing higher levels of income inequality and unemployment tend to exhibit stronger populist political mobilization. In such contexts, citizens may perceive existing political institutions as unable or unwilling to address socio-economic disparities. Populist leaders often capitalize on these grievances by framing political competition as a struggle between marginalized citizens and privileged elites [7, 22].

Institutional trust also plays a crucial role. Governance indicators from international datasets suggest that lower levels of public confidence in political institutions—such as legislative bodies, political parties, and government agencies—are correlated with increased support for anti-establishment political actors. When citizens lose confidence in established institutions, they become more receptive to leaders who promise to challenge traditional

political structures and introduce systemic reforms [23, 34]. Digital media has further amplified the capacity of populist leaders to mobilize supporters. Social media platforms allow political actors to communicate directly with the public, bypassing traditional media channels. This direct communication enables the rapid dissemination of simplified political narratives that emphasize emotional appeal and collective identity [25]. Structural factors associated with the rise of populist leadership is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Structural factors associated with the rise of populist leadership.

Structural Factor	Observed Trend in Developing Regions	Political Impact
Economic inequality	Increasing income disparity in several emerging economies	Strengthens anti-elite sentiment
Institutional distrust	Declining public trust in government institutions	Encourages support for outsider candidates
Digital political communication	Rapid growth of social media usage	Accelerates populist mobilization
Governance challenges	Perceived corruption and inefficiency	Fuels anti-establishment narratives

These findings suggest that populism is not solely driven by ideological preferences but is closely linked to structural socio-economic conditions and institutional performance. In environments where governance challenges persist and economic opportunities remain uneven, populist rhetoric becomes a powerful mechanism for political mobilization [25, 26].

### 3.2. *Public perception and political polarization.*

Public opinion data reveal significant divisions in how citizens perceive populist leadership. While some segments of society view populist leaders as defenders of ordinary citizens and advocates for political reform, others perceive them as polarizing figures who undermine democratic norms. Survey results indicate that individuals experiencing economic insecurity or dissatisfaction with political institutions are more likely to support populist leaders. These citizens often interpret populist rhetoric as a legitimate response to perceived failures of the political system. Conversely, individuals with higher levels of institutional trust and political engagement tend to express greater concern about the potential risks associated with populist leadership [27, 28].

The qualitative content analysis of political speeches and campaign messages further illustrates how populist narratives contribute to polarization. Populist discourse frequently emphasizes a binary political framework that contrasts “the people” with “corrupt elites,” foreign actors, or political opponents. This framing simplifies complex policy debates and strengthens collective identity among supporters, but it may also intensify ideological divisions within society. Social media environments appear to amplify this dynamic by creating information ecosystems where individuals are primarily exposed to content aligned with their political preferences. As a result, political discourse becomes increasingly fragmented, with limited interaction between opposing viewpoints [20, 29, 30]. Public perception toward populist leadership is summarized in Table 2. These contrasting perceptions illustrate the dual nature of populism. While it can mobilize political participation and amplify public grievances, it may also reinforce ideological divisions that complicate democratic dialogue and compromise.

**Table 2.** Public perception toward populist leadership.

Public Perception Dimension	Supporters' View	Critics' View
Representation	Voice of ordinary citizens	Oversimplifies complex issues
Governance reform	Necessary challenge to elites	Potential threat to institutions
Political communication	Direct and transparent	Emotionally manipulative
Democratic impact	Revitalizes participation	Increases polarization

### 3.3. Implications for democratic stability.

The relationship between populism and democratic stability is complex and multifaceted [1, 2]. The findings suggest that populist leadership can have both positive and negative implications for democratic governance depending on the institutional context and the intensity of political polarization. On one hand, populist movements can stimulate political engagement by encouraging participation among citizens who previously felt excluded from political processes. In several developing democracies, populist campaigns have succeeded in mobilizing new voters and increasing public debate on issues such as corruption, economic inequality, and social justice (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual relationship between structural drivers, populist leadership, and democratic outcomes.

On the other hand, excessive polarization can weaken democratic institutions by reducing opportunities for cooperation among political actors [20, 31]. Highly polarized environments often lead to confrontational political discourse, legislative gridlock, and declining trust in democratic procedures. When political competition becomes defined by antagonistic narratives rather than policy debates, governance effectiveness may decline. The analysis also suggests that the concentration of political authority around charismatic populist leaders can create institutional tensions [12, 32]. In some cases, populist leaders seek to bypass traditional checks

and balances by appealing directly to public opinion, which may weaken institutional oversight mechanisms [21, 33].

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 illustrates how structural socio-economic factors and institutional challenges interact with digital political communication to facilitate the rise of populist leadership. Once populist movements gain influence, they can contribute to increasing political polarization, which subsequently affects democratic outcomes. Overall, the findings highlight that populism is deeply embedded within broader socio-economic and institutional dynamics. While populist leadership can serve as a mechanism for expressing public dissatisfaction and encouraging political participation, its long-term effects on democratic stability depend largely on the resilience of democratic institutions and the capacity of political actors to maintain constructive political dialogue [34, 35]. Future research should further investigate the regional variations in populist dynamics and explore how institutional reforms and governance improvements may reduce the risk of destructive polarization while preserving democratic engagement.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study examined the relationship between populist leadership and political polarization in developing regions by analyzing structural drivers, public perceptions, and their implications for democratic stability. The findings indicate that the rise of populist leadership is strongly associated with socio-economic and institutional conditions, particularly economic inequality, declining trust in political institutions, and the expansion of digital political communication. These structural factors create an environment in which anti-establishment narratives resonate with citizens who perceive existing political systems as unresponsive to their concerns. The analysis also demonstrates that public perceptions toward populist leadership are highly divided. While supporters often view populist leaders as authentic representatives of public interests and catalysts for political reform, critics frequently interpret populist rhetoric as overly simplistic and potentially detrimental to democratic norms. This divergence in perception contributes to increasing political polarization, which may reduce opportunities for consensus-building and complicate governance processes. Despite these challenges, populism does not necessarily undermine democracy in all contexts. In some cases, populist movements may enhance political participation by mobilizing marginalized groups and drawing attention to neglected socio-economic issues. However, when polarization intensifies and institutional checks and balances are weakened, democratic stability may be at risk. Strengthening institutional transparency, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing socio-economic inequalities remain essential strategies for mitigating the potential negative impacts of populist politics in developing democracies.

#### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that there are no competing financial or non-financial interests related to this study.

#### **Data Availability Statement**

The data used in this study were obtained from publicly available secondary sources, including international governance databases, public opinion surveys, and policy documents. These

datasets are accessible through organizations such as the World Bank, Freedom House, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Additional data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Author Contributions

The author was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and preparation of the manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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