

Populist Politics, and Democratic Legitimacy in Contemporary India

Dr. Balaji Lakavathu

PGT/Political Science, TG Model School, Thimmapur, Karimnagar District.

1. Introduction:

The contemporary political landscape of India is increasingly characterized by the rise of populist politics, which has fundamentally altered the relationship between the state, political leadership, and democratic legitimacy. Unlike authoritarian regimes where power is imposed coercively, populist regimes derive authority through electoral success and mass approval. Populism thus functions as a paradox within democracy—strengthening popular participation while simultaneously challenging institutional constraints.

In India, populist politics has gained prominence in the post-liberalization era, coinciding with heightened electoral competition, media expansion, and mass political mobilization. Political leaders increasingly claim to embody the “will of the people,” often positioning themselves against elites, institutions, or dissenting voices. This claim enables the concentration of power in the executive while maintaining democratic legitimacy through elections.

This paper seeks to examine populist politics not merely as a political style but as a transformative force that reshapes state power and democratic legitimacy. It argues that populism redefines legitimacy by privileging popular mandate over constitutional procedure, thereby altering the balance between democracy and governance.

2. Populism, State Power, and Legitimacy:

Populism, state power, and legitimacy are deeply interconnected in contemporary democratic politics. Populism operates as a political logic that claims to represent the authentic will of the people, positioning political leadership as the sole legitimate voice of popular sovereignty. Through this claim, populist politics reshapes the foundations of state power by redefining how authority is acquired, exercised, and justified.

In populist politics, state power is increasingly centralized in the executive and personalized around leadership. The state is presented not as an impersonal constitutional structure but as an extension of popular will embodied in the leader. This personalization enables political authority to bypass institutional constraints such as legislatures, regulatory bodies, and judicial oversight, which are often portrayed as elitist or anti-people.

Legitimacy under populism shifts from institutional and procedural norms to popular endorsement. Electoral victories are treated as moral mandates rather than limited authorizations within a constitutional framework. As a result, majority support is used to justify expansive use of state power, often reducing the significance of pluralism, dissent, and minority rights.

Populism also transforms the relationship between the state and citizens. Citizens are increasingly viewed as direct supporters or opponents of the ruling leadership rather than as rights-bearing participants in a constitutional democracy. Loyalty to leadership becomes a measure of political legitimacy, while criticism of state actions is framed as opposition to the people themselves.

While populism enhances mass political participation and strengthens emotional identification with the state, it simultaneously weakens democratic accountability. Institutions designed to check state power are delegitimized, and governance becomes centered on continuous popular mobilization rather than deliberative decision-making.

Thus, populism fundamentally alters the balance between state power and democratic legitimacy. It strengthens authority through popular consent but risks undermining the constitutional and institutional foundations that sustain democratic governance over the long term.

3. Objectives of the Study:

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine populist politics as a mode of exercising state power
2. To analyze the impact of populism on democratic legitimacy
3. To assess the relationship between populist leadership and executive dominance
4. To evaluate institutional responses to populist governance
5. To understand the long-term implications of populism for Indian democracy

4. Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and descriptive research methodology, supported by secondary quantitative data.

Sources of Data:

- Election Commission of India reports
- National Election Studies (CSDS–Lokniti)
- Parliamentary proceedings and constitutional debates
- Peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books

Methodological Approach:

- Conceptual analysis using political theory
- Interpretative analysis of institutional trends
- Comparative assessment across electoral cycles

The methodology emphasizes theoretical rigor and empirical grounding without primary field surveys.

5. Post-Liberalization Political Environment:

The post-liberalization political environment in India represents a significant transformation in the structure and practice of democratic politics. The reforms initiated in the early 1990s altered not only the economic orientation of the state but also the political conditions under which power is contested and exercised. Politics in this period became increasingly shaped by electoral competition, governance narratives, and leadership-centered mobilization rather than ideological consensus.

One of the defining features of the post-liberalization political environment is the decline of ideology-driven politics. Traditional debates centered on state control, socialism, and planning gave way to pragmatic political strategies focused on electoral viability and performance. Political parties adapted to this shift by emphasizing governance, delivery, and popular appeal rather than doctrinal commitments.

The fragmentation of the party system further reshaped the political environment. The erosion of single-party dominance led to the rise of coalition governments and strengthened the role of regional parties. This development enhanced federal bargaining and diversified political

representation, while simultaneously intensifying electoral competition at both national and state levels.

Another important aspect of the post-liberalization political environment is the expansion of political communication. Media proliferation and digital platforms transformed how political messages are constructed and disseminated. Leaders increasingly relied on mass communication to mobilize public opinion, reinforcing populist styles of politics.

The post-liberalization period also witnessed changes in state–citizen relations. Citizens began to engage with the state primarily through elections and political mobilization, reinforcing electoral democracy as the central source of legitimacy. While democratic participation deepened, concerns regarding institutional autonomy, centralization of power, and the quality of democratic governance became more pronounced.

Overall, the post-liberalization political environment reflects a shift toward competitive, mobilizational, and leader-oriented politics, redefining democratic practice in contemporary India.

6. Populist Leadership and Executive Centralization:

Populist leadership and executive centralization are closely linked phenomena in contemporary democratic politics. Populist leaders derive their authority from direct appeals to “the people,” claiming to embody popular will rather than merely represent it. This claim enables leaders to concentrate political power within the executive branch while maintaining democratic legitimacy through electoral success. As a result, executive centralization becomes a defining characteristic of populist governance.

In populist systems, leadership is highly personalized and charismatic. Decision-making authority increasingly rests with the executive leader, reducing the role of collective cabinet responsibility, party deliberation, and legislative debate. Institutions that traditionally mediate political power are portrayed as inefficient, elitist, or obstructive to popular interests. This narrative legitimizes the expansion of executive authority in the name of effective governance.

Executive centralization under populist leadership often weakens institutional checks and balances. Legislatures play a diminished role in policy formulation, while bureaucratic and regulatory institutions are subjected to greater political control. Judicial and oversight bodies may face political pressure when their actions are perceived to challenge popular mandates.

Populist leadership also transforms governance into a continuous process of political mobilization. Executive actions are justified through popular endorsement rather than institutional procedure, blurring the boundary between governance and political campaigning. While this model strengthens leader–citizen identification and enhances mass participation, it raises serious concerns about democratic accountability, institutional autonomy, and the long-term resilience of constitutional governance.

7. State Power and Institutional Autonomy:

State power and institutional autonomy constitute the core pillars of democratic governance. In a constitutional democracy, state power is exercised through a network of autonomous institutions that ensure accountability, legality, and balance among different branches of government. However, in contemporary political contexts shaped by populist politics, the relationship between state power and institutional autonomy has undergone significant transformation.

Populist governance often seeks to centralize state power by redefining institutions as instruments of popular will rather than independent constitutional bodies. Legislatures,

regulatory agencies, and oversight institutions are increasingly expected to align with executive priorities. When institutions assert independence, they are frequently portrayed as elitist, unaccountable, or obstructive to democratic mandates.

This dynamic weakens institutional autonomy by subjecting decision-making processes to political influence. Bureaucratic neutrality and regulatory independence are challenged as state power becomes personalized and centralized. Institutional norms that once ensured checks and balances are gradually replaced by executive discretion justified through popular support.

The erosion of institutional autonomy has broader implications for democratic accountability. When institutions lose independence, their capacity to scrutinize executive actions diminishes, reducing transparency and oversight. At the same time, citizens are encouraged to equate loyalty to leadership with loyalty to the state, blurring the distinction between government authority and democratic governance.

While centralized state power may enhance policy efficiency and political responsiveness in the short term, the weakening of institutional autonomy poses long-term risks to constitutionalism and democratic stability. Sustainable democratic governance depends on preserving the balance between effective state power and autonomous institutional functioning.

8. Statistical Indicators of Democratic Change:

Statistical indicators play a crucial role in assessing democratic change by providing measurable evidence of shifts in political participation, representation, and governance. In the context of India, electoral data, survey findings, and institutional metrics offer important insights into how democracy has evolved in the post-liberalization period.

One of the most visible indicators of democratic change is voter turnout. Data from the Election Commission of India show a steady increase in voter participation in national and state elections since the early 1990s. Higher turnout reflects greater political engagement and suggests that elections remain a central mechanism for expressing popular sovereignty.

Survey-based studies, particularly National Election Studies, reveal changing patterns of voter behaviour. An increasing proportion of voters identify leadership appeal, governance performance, and political communication as decisive factors influencing electoral choices. This shift indicates a move away from stable, ideology-based voting toward more dynamic and personality-oriented preferences.

Another important statistical indicator is the narrowing gap in participation across social groups. Improved turnout among women, rural voters, and historically marginalized communities points to a more inclusive democratic process. At the same time, electoral volatility has increased, with voters more willing to change party preferences across elections.

Together, these statistical indicators highlight a transformation in democratic practice. While participation and inclusion have expanded, the personalization of politics and volatility of voter preferences raise important questions about institutional accountability and the long-term quality of democratic governance.

9. Democratic Legitimacy and Majoritarianism:

Democratic legitimacy and majoritarianism are closely linked yet potentially conflicting principles in contemporary democratic systems. Democratic legitimacy traditionally derives from constitutional procedures, rule of law, institutional accountability, and respect for political pluralism. However, in many democracies, including India, legitimacy is increasingly interpreted

through a majoritarian lens, where electoral victory and numerical majority are treated as the primary sources of political authority.

Majoritarianism emphasizes the will of the majority as the ultimate expression of popular sovereignty. Under this logic, governments that secure electoral mandates claim enhanced legitimacy to implement policies without extensive institutional constraints. While this approach reinforces the democratic principle of popular rule, it often sidelines minority rights, dissenting voices, and constitutional safeguards.

The rise of populist politics has intensified majoritarian interpretations of legitimacy. Electoral success is framed as a moral endorsement of leadership and governance, transforming democratic mandates into unconditional authority. Opposition parties, independent institutions, and civil society actors are sometimes portrayed as obstacles to the popular will rather than essential components of democratic accountability.

This shift poses significant challenges for liberal and constitutional democracy. When legitimacy is reduced to majority support alone, democratic governance risks becoming exclusionary and less deliberative. Sustaining democratic legitimacy therefore requires balancing majority rule with institutional checks, protection of minority rights, and respect for pluralism to ensure that democracy remains both participatory and inclusive.

10. Accountability under Populist Governance:

Accountability in populist regimes becomes episodic and election-centered. Continuous institutional oversight is replaced by periodic electoral endorsement.

Mechanisms of accountability weaken due to:

- Reduced parliamentary scrutiny
- Media polarization
- Political loyalty overriding institutional norms

Democracy becomes reactive rather than deliberative.

Risks to Constitutional Democracy:

The long-term risks of populist politics include:

- Erosion of constitutional norms
- Weakening of institutional checks
- Decline of deliberative democracy

Populism may normalize exceptional governance practices.

Comparative Democratic Perspective:

Globally, populism presents similar challenges across democracies. The Indian case illustrates how populism adapts to constitutional frameworks while altering democratic substance. A comparative democratic perspective helps situate national political developments within broader global patterns, allowing for a deeper understanding of democratic change. Across diverse political systems, democracies have experienced similar challenges related to populism, leadership centralization, and evolving forms of political legitimacy. Examining these trends comparatively highlights how democratic institutions adapt under conditions of mass mobilization and electoral competition.

In many established and emerging democracies, populist politics has redefined the relationship between citizens and the state. Leaders increasingly claim direct representation of popular will, often bypassing intermediary institutions such as political parties and legislatures.

This pattern is evident across presidential and parliamentary systems, indicating that populism transcends specific constitutional frameworks.

Comparative analysis also reveals common consequences of populist governance, including executive dominance, weakening of institutional checks, and majoritarian interpretations of democracy. At the same time, populism has contributed to increased political participation and voter engagement in several democracies, particularly among marginalized groups.

The Indian experience reflects these global democratic trends while retaining unique features shaped by federalism, social diversity, and constitutionalism. A comparative perspective underscores that the challenges facing Indian democracy are not isolated but part of a broader transformation of democratic practice worldwide, emphasizing the need for institutional resilience and normative safeguards across democratic systems.

Conclusion:

Populist politics has fundamentally reshaped state power and democratic legitimacy in contemporary India. While it strengthens mass participation and political identification, it simultaneously challenges institutional autonomy, constitutionalism, and pluralism. The central dilemma lies in balancing popular sovereignty with institutional restraint.

For Indian democracy to remain resilient, democratic legitimacy must extend beyond electoral mandates to include accountability, constitutional governance, and institutional integrity. Populism, if left unchecked, risks transforming democracy from a system of governance into a politics of permanent mobilization.

References:

1. Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The Politics of the Governed*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
2. Dahl, R. (1989). *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Election Commission of India. (2019). *Statistical Report on General Elections*. New Delhi.
4. Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
5. Arendt, H. (1963). *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin.
6. Canovan, M. (1999). "Trust the People!" *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2-16.
7. Jayal, N. G. (2006). *Representing India*. New York: Palgrave.
8. Kohli, A. (2012). *Poverty Amid Plenty in the New India*. Cambridge: CUP.
9. Kothari, R. (2010). *Politics in India*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
10. Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
11. Linz, J. (1990). "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy*, 1(1).
12. Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: CUP.
13. Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic Deficit*. Cambridge: CUP.
14. Palshikar, S. (2018). "Indian Party System." *Studies in Indian Politics*, 6(2).
15. Patnaik, P. (2014). "Populism and Democracy." *Social Scientist*, 42(1-2).
16. Rajan, R. (2019). *The Third Pillar*. New York: Penguin.
17. Rudolph, L., & Rudolph, S. (2008). *Explaining Indian Democracy*. New Delhi: OUP.
18. Shapiro, I. (2003). *The State of Democratic Theory*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
19. Varshney, A. (2019). *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside*. Cambridge: CUP.
20. Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York.
21. Yadav, Y. (2014). "Electoral Politics in Contemporary India." *EPW*, 49(39).
22. CSDS-Lokniti. (2019). *National Election Study*. New Delhi.