



**KAUTILYA**  
**SCHOOL OF**  
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# Issue **Brief** Series



**“Trumpism: A Case Study of Populism in International Relations”**

**Issue Brief: IB-2025-24**

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**Cite this Report** as Tehniyat. Trumpism: A Case Study of Populism in International Relations (2025)  
[online]. Available at: <https://kspp.edu.in/issue-brief/trumpism-a-case-study-of-populism-in-international-relations>

## **Trumpism: A Case Study of Populism in International Relations**

### **Abstract**

This issue brief explores the nature, evolution, and implications of populism, emphasizing its expression in Donald Trump's leadership. It defines populism as a political style rooted in the binary of "the people" versus "the elite," fueled by charismatic leadership, anti-institutionalism, and emotional rhetoric. The brief examines both left- and right-wing populism and its dual impact on democracy—mobilizing grievances while undermining institutions. Focusing on Trump's first and second terms, it argues that his populism has evolved into authoritarianism, threatening democratic norms, institutional checks, and pluralistic governance in the U.S. and abroad.

### **Understanding Populism**

One of the most debated and adaptive concepts in contemporary political science is populism. It is more of a political style or approach rather than a coherent ideology that relies on a clear-cut distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Populism fundamentally avows to express the universal will of people through positing one leader or party as being uniquely representative of that will. The binary vision of society, in which society is split into two homogeneous and opposing segments, is essentially the underlying framework through which populism functions.

Historically, populism has manifested both on the right and the left and in various cultural contexts. Populism is not limited to one political ideology—left populists might talk of economic fairness and redistribution, whereas right populists talk of identity, nationalism, and immigration. Populism's versatility comes from its ability to take on and co-opt various issues based on the emotional and cultural heartbeat of those voting. Populism does not offer consensus or deliberative governance; instead, it offers strong action often outside of checks and balances.

Yet another defining feature of populism is its communication style. Populist politicians make use of highly emotional, direct, and simplistic speech as a means of communication for connecting with large masses of people. Populist politicians articulate their policies and political struggles as

moral crusades and draw issues of complicated policies into emotionally charged dualities. In this manner, they establish a personal, virtually charisma-based relationship with their followers by depicting themselves as political outsiders who have arrived in order to topple a corrupt and elitist establishment.

Populism works best in times of economic and political crisis, like mass discontent, perceived injustice, or exclusion based on identity. Populists at such times can capitalize on fear, articulate a sense of loss (economic, cultural, or national), and offer a sense of return/ belonging and redemption in the form of political change. The rhetoric is usually exclusionary, defining "the people" in strict terms like national, ethnic, religious, or class, and excluding those outside this definition.

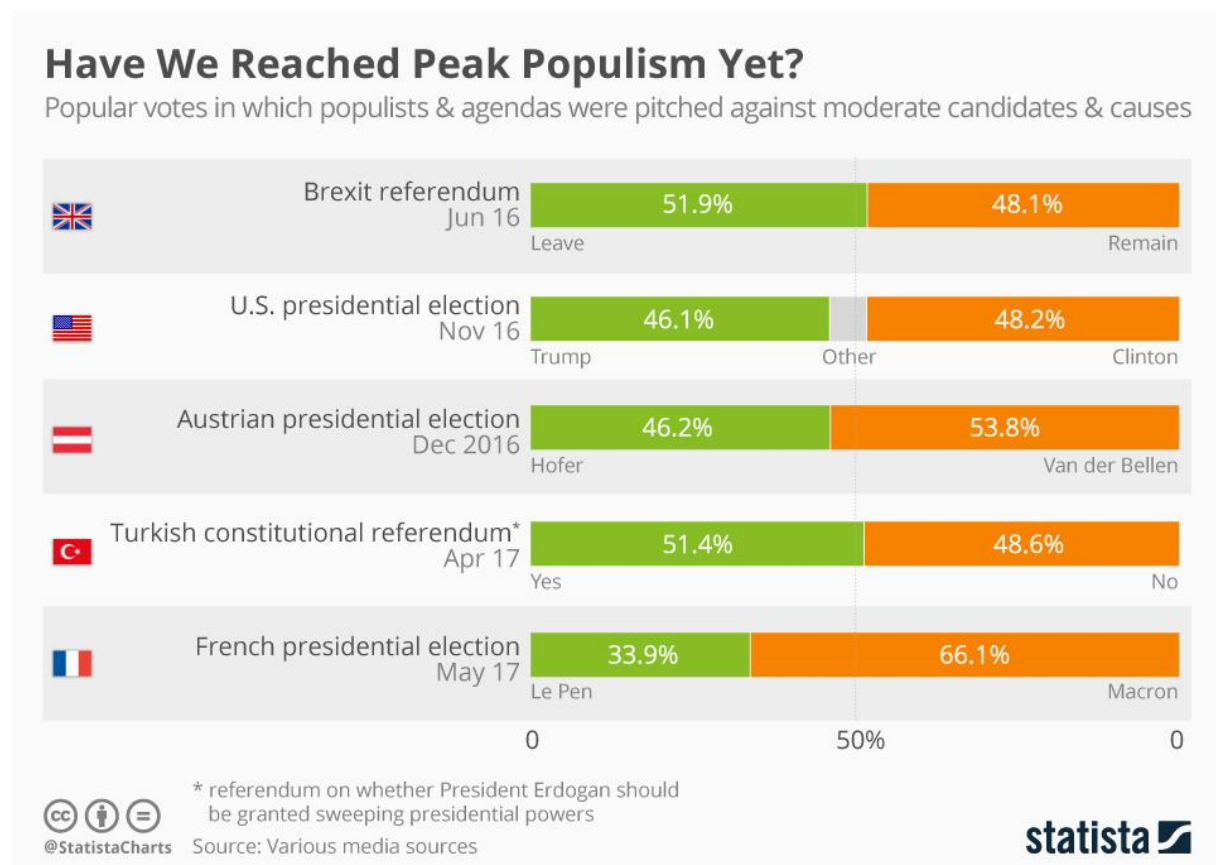


Figure 1: Populism in the United States, Europe and Turkey. [Source: Statista](#)

## Features of Populism

Populism is defined by a set of characteristics that are interdependent and which determine both its political discourse and its political regime.

1. **Elites and People:** The distinguishing feature of populism is the dichotomous opposition that it establishes between the "ordinary people" and the "selfish elite." Populists claim that society is dominated by an elite who are greedy and neglect or stifle the popular will. This allows populists to position themselves as the only genuine representatives of the popular will, frequently demonizing opposing voices as traitors or conspirators.
2. **Moral Simplicity:** Populist rhetoric flourishes on moral reductionism and black-and-white thinking. The issues are posed in black-and-white, good and evil, honest citizens and corrupt elites, insiders and outsiders. In appealing to moral outrage, populists reduce complicated political arguments to simplistic language and invite a politics of emotional reaction rather than deliberation or subtlety.
3. **Charismatic Leadership:** Populism is all about the image of a charismatic leader who claims to have a special bond with the people. The leader is the symbol of the people's grievances and aspirations, and his or her own legitimacy will override institutional legitimacy. The leader is then framed as one who breaks through bureaucratic red tape to deliver what the people want.

Position in Political Landscape			
		INSIDER	OUTSIDER
Ideological Commitment	OPPORTUNIST	<b>Pivot Populist</b> <i>Adopt populism after coming to power.</i> <b>Target of rhetoric:</b> elites & masses <b>Rhetoric-Policy alignment:</b> NO <b>Example:</b> Vladimir Putin	<b>Strategic Populist</b> <i>Adopt populist electoral strategy.</i> <b>Target of rhetoric:</b> masses only <b>Rhetoric-Policy alignment:</b> NO <b>Example:</b> Donald Trump
	TRUE BELIEVER	<b>Classical Populist</b> <i>Come to power as populists.</i> <b>Target of rhetoric:</b> elites & masses <b>Rhetoric-Policy alignment:</b> YES <b>Example:</b> Hugo Chavez	<b>Oppositional Populist</b> <i>Come into being as populists.</i> <b>Target of rhetoric:</b> masses only <b>Rhetoric-Policy alignment:</b> YES <b>Example:</b> Marine LePen

**Table 1:** Classification of Populists

Figure 2: Toward a Typology of Populists, [Source: Center for Political Studies \(CPS\) Blog](#)

#### 4. Anti-Institutional Feeling

Populists often frame institutions—whether the judiciary, the media, or the legislature—as barriers to the will of the people. Institutions are frequently delegitimized or undermined, blamed for collusion in elite corruption or incompetence. They lose the confidence of the people and pave the way for executive abuse.

5. Direct Appeal: Populists tend to circumvent usual political and media intermediaries in order to communicate directly with the people. In contemporary times, this is achieved through social media sites, mass rallies, and emotively charged broadcasts. This form of communication provides a direct and unmediated connection between the masses and the leader, leaving minimal room for critical evaluation or other voices.

These characteristics don't occur in the same way in every populist movement, but when they are combined, they present a familiar pattern that enables us to recognize populism as an identifiable political style.

### **Types of Poulism**

Populism is not ideologically monolithic; it takes on different forms on the political left and right and is conditioned by particular cultural and national environments. Generally speaking, populism can be divided into two broad categories:

**Right-Wing Populism:** This type of populism is generally marked by nationalism, anti- immigration positions, nativism, and cultural conservatism. Right-wing populists tend to build their accounts on the preservation of national identity, framing immigrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities as dangers to social cohesion. Economic matters are presented in the context of

safeguarding national workers from globalization and foreign competition. The likes of Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen fit this type of populism.

**Left-Wing Populism:** By comparison, left-wing populism is centered around economic disparity, social justice, and policies of redistribution. Left-wing populists decry neoliberal capitalism, corporate global elites, and the banks for their disregard of the working class. Here, the divide is adversarial between the "working people" and the "economic elite." Bernie Sanders (to a certain degree), Jeremy Corbyn, and Latin American politicians such as Hugo Chávez or Evo Morales are examples. While both wings have the same fundamental populist structure, their policy objectives, social foundation, and cultural targets are very different. Notably, populism is frequently hybridized, taking on elements of either wing as pragmatically advantageous.

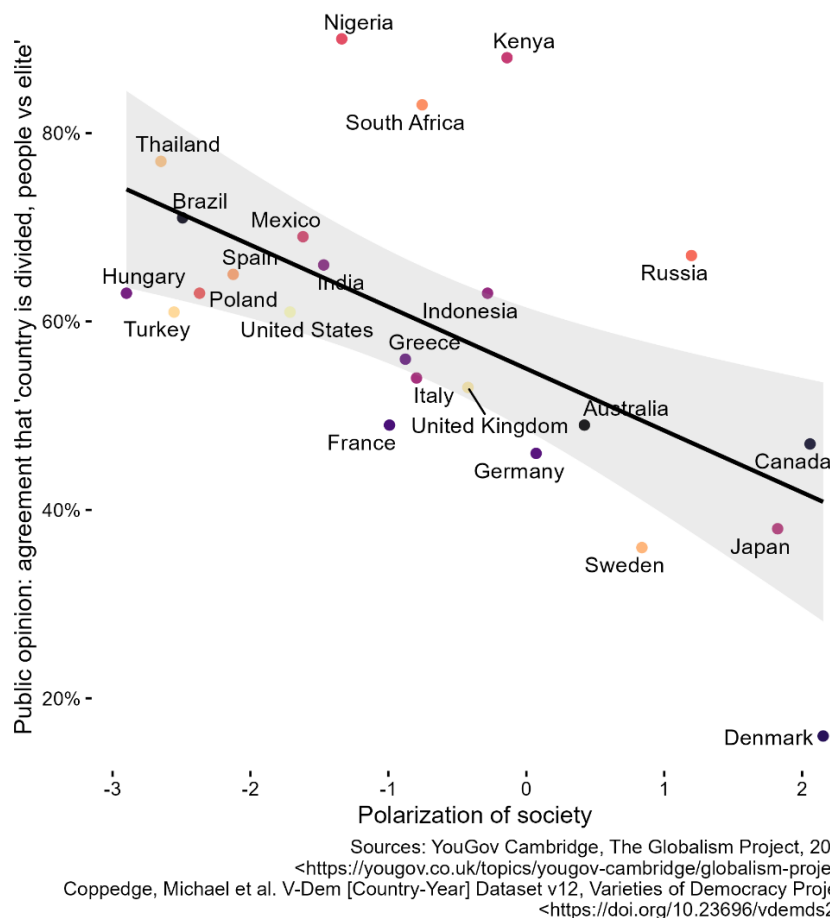


Figure 3: Explainer: Populism - Left and Right, Progressive and Regressive, [Source: International](#)

[IDEA](#)



## **Populism in the Modern Democratic Context**

In modern democracies, populism is a double-edged sword. It can both restore and threaten democratic routines. On the positive side, populism can be an antidote, focusing attention on issues that conventional elites have ignored, that is, rising income disparities, corruption, and the loss of cultural identity. By giving vent to such concerns, populist movements can induce mainstream politics to be more accountable and participatory. To that extent, populism can mobilize political participation and revive democratic life for disadvantaged citizens.

Yet populism also carries considerable threats to democratic institutions and norms. Its dismissal of institutional balances and checks, its proclivity for power centralization within a charismatic individual, and its aggressive suppression of dissenting voices tend to undermine the liberal democratic regime. Populists frequently appeal to speaking for the "true people," thereby entitling them to quash the difference of opinion, circumvent legislatures, or assault the media. In addition, populism lives by crisis and polarisation. It requires a sense of urgency or danger to rationalise its exceptional measures and continue its political thrust. This results in a politics of continuous mobilisation, keeping societies in an intensified state of conflict, with consensus becoming all but impossible.

With the advent of the digital era, the dissemination of populism has been turbocharged by social media and algorithmic amplification. Populists have effectively employed these media to circumvent the conventional gatekeepers, disseminate misinformation, and build echo chambers where their constituencies are protected from competing points of view. This has contributed to the intensifying fragmentation and tribalism of democratic societies.

However, it would be a mistake to consider populism to be intrinsically anti-democratic. Most populist movements arise out of genuine grievances, that is, economic exclusion, political marginalization, or loss of identity, and attempt to reclaim popular sovereignty. The threat is when populist leaders exploit these grievances in order to undermine the foundations of democracy rather than enrich them.

## **Populism in International Relations**

Populism has not only transformed domestic politics but also international relations (IR). Conventional IR theories, such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, are predisposed to concentrate on systemic pressures and rational state calculations. But the emergence of populist movements and leaders introduced a new factor into the world stage, which is identity politics, emotive rhetoric, and unpredictable policymaking rooted in personalist leadership. On the global level, populist leaders usually refuse multilateral arrangements for bilateral agreements over which they have more control. Multilateral bodies like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and all forms of human rights institutions are perceived by populists as instruments of global governance run by the elites that undermine state sovereignty. Populist foreign policy is consequently frequently nationalist, transactional, and wary of global norms. This change results in a more splintered international order, in which alliances are temporary and rule-based cooperation is undermined.

Populists tend to describe international affairs in terms of victimhood and the moral high ground. Their nations are seen to have been harmed by a world elite through unequal trade agreements, foreign incursions, or global migration. This account supports protectionist economic policies, immigration restrictionism, and even militarism. Populism in IR is hence reactive and often combative, prioritizing symbolic actions over sustained diplomacy. In addition, populist leaders also personalize diplomacy, making international summits into venues for their own political image-making. The focus on strongman diplomacy, often characterized by public clashes, erratic actions, or daring unilateral actions, undermines the predictability and institutional memory that are essential to international cooperation. In populist foreign policy, appearances and stories tend to take precedence over substance.

We can see populist forces at work in IR in different regions. Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have both utilized populist rhetoric to redefine foreign policy

in opposition to Western liberal norms. In Latin America, left-wing populists such as Hugo Chávez used anti-imperialist rhetoric to build alternative regional blocs. And in America, Donald Trump's "America First" policy represented a dramatic populist turn abroad, abandoning old friends, discrediting multilateral pacts, and embarking on a unilateral agenda.

	Populist Narratives	Pluralist Narratives
<b>Characters</b>	Black and white, nominal, either with positive or negative characteristics	Complex, “real”, often ambiguous, with both positive and negative characteristics
<b>In-group</b>	Homogeneous, made up of characters with exclusively positive characteristics	Heterogeneous, made up of complex characters with positive but also negative characteristics
<b>Out-group</b>	Homogeneous, made up of characters with exclusively negative characteristics	Heterogeneous, made up of complex characters with negative but also positive characteristics
<b>Intergroup Relations</b>	Out-group-led hierarchy Antagonism	Diverse, e.g., coexistence, cooperation, competition, conflict

Figure 4: [\*Conceptualizing a Populist Narrative in: Populism Volume 4 Issue 2 \(2021\)\*](#)

### **The Case of Donald Trump: A Study in Populist Leadership (First Term)**

Donald Trump's administration (2017–2021) is amongst the most researched instances of right-wing populism in contemporary democratic politics. Trump's ascent to the presidency was based on a politics of grievance, cultural disorientation, and economic nationalism. Trump leveraged broad discontent with globalization, political correctness, immigration, and the Washington elite, positioning himself as an outsider who could "drain the swamp" and make America great again.

**Rhetoric and Messaging:** Trump's political messaging was literally populist from the very start.

Campaign slogans such as "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) evoked a memory of a lost golden era and pledged to restore an America supposedly discredited by liberal elites, globalization, and multiculturalism. His messages were straightforward, divisive, and emotive, while speaking to white working-class voters who resented mainstream political speak. Trump presented himself as the honest voice of "the forgotten American," using blunt language and frequently violating political correctness in order to speak to his base.

**Anti-Media and Anti-Establishment Feelings:** A key pillar of Trump's populism was his contempt for elites, whether political, academic, or media. He frequently derogated the media as "fake news" and referred to major media outlets as "the enemy of the people."

### **Donald Trump's Second Term: 2025 Populism and the Shift Toward Authoritarianism**

Donald Trump's White House return in 2025 has amplified the populist forces that characterized his initial term, but with an even more unapologetically authoritarian tone. This populism of his second term cares less about institutional legitimacy and more about concentrating power, upending checks and balances, and making Trumpism an enduring part of the American political landscape. What was initially a radical, outsider populism has developed into a brazen, state-sponsored movement with ambitions to be systemic.

**Post-Democratic Populism and Institutional Decay:** After his re-election, Trump doubled down on his story that American institutions are stacked against "the people." Trump amplified the attempts to purge civil servants, undermined the independence of the Department of Justice, and substituted loyalty for expertise in federal appointments. During the 2025 term, a "Schedule F" category was created to make it simpler to fire thousands of federal workers, so ideological agreement could substitute for bureaucratic neutrality. At the same time, accountability agencies like the Office of Government Ethics and the Environmental Protection Agency were disarmed. These actions effectively undermined institutional brakes, synchronizing the state machinery with Trump's political and personal agenda.

**Weaponization of Law and Judiciary:** Trump's Department of Justice in 2025 increasingly targeted political rivals, media personalities, and even former politicians who had attacked him. Federal prosecutors opened investigations and audits against Democratic legislators and left-leaning NGOs, sometimes without a basis in law. The judiciary, now stocked with Trump-nominated judges in his first term, became an engine for rubber-stamping executive actions. Even presented as a movement against "deep state corruption," this move is characteristic of traditional authoritarian populist strategy—weaponizing the law to suppress dissent.

Culture Wars and Authoritarian Nationalism: Trump's second term has witnessed the culture wars being dramatically escalated. Executive orders have been directed at diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, critical race theory, gender-affirming medical care, and LGBTQ+ rights. Funding for public universities hangs in the balance unless they buy into new curricula encouraging "patriotic education." These are not policy shifts, these are an attempt at reengineering American cultural identity into ethnonationalist and traditionalist terms. The government's embrace of Christian nationalist language has only further obscured the distinction between religion and state, doubling down on an exclusionary vision of who is welcome in the American nation.



Figure 5: Three graphs that show what's happening with Donald Trump's popularity, [Source: The Conversation](#)

Expansion of Surveillance State and Immigration: Trump's second term has also been accompanied by an enlargement of immigration limitations and domestic spying. Mass deportations have come back under fresh executive orders with fewer legal guarantees targeting undocumented foreigners. A networked biometric monitoring system for the entire nation has been installed under the guise of border management and crime containment. These represent both the ethnonational aspect of Trump's populism as well as his more general design to utilize the state apparatus as a tool of population control and ideological conformity.

Foreign Policy: Authoritarian Solidarity and Strategic Withdrawal: Trump's foreign policy during his second term has extended the "America First" spirit but with more contempt for liberal internationalism. The U.S. has pulled out of the last multilateral agreements, such as climate frameworks and human rights conventions. Trump has, instead, fostered closer relations with strongmen such as Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, and Jair Bolsonaro and has celebrated a common anti-globalist spirit. The United States' role within NATO has been significantly reduced, and the withdrawal of troops from hot spots around the world has left longtime allies racing to reassess their security arrangements. Trump's foreign policy is now focused on sovereignty, transactionalism, and ideological congruence with fellow populist- authoritarians.

From Populism to Authoritarianism: A Conceptual Shift: Trump's 2025 presidency represents a shift from "populism in democracy" to "authoritarian populism." While populism first depends on opposition and disruption, institutionalization involves seizing state machinery and tamping down alternate power bases. Trump's second term, thus, is not merely about anti-elite discourse or majoritarianism—it's about restructuring the political system itself. There is increasingly widespread concern among scholars and political watchers that American democracy is experiencing democratic backsliding in the name of populist rule. Civil liberties, minority rights, and electoral integrity are all seriously threatened.

The theoretical basis for this development rests on the ideas of scholars such as Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, who identify inclusive and exclusive populism, and democratic correctives and authoritarian regressions. Trump's conduct in his second term leans in the direction of the latter: a populism that aims to delegitimize pluralism, impose ideological hegemony, and shield itself from democratic oversight.

### **Trump's first 100 days in his second term**

Donald Trump's first 100 days in his second term (January 20–April 30, 2025) saw an aggressive return to populist hardline rule, if with slightly more authoritarian undertones than during his initial time in office. He issued 143 executive orders, a record for any U.S. president in this era, with a strong emphasis on mass deportations, tariff increases, and combative civil service removals under an expanded Schedule F policy (The New York Times, 2025). Trump deployed non-traditional agencies such as the Postal Service and IRS to help identify undocumented immigrants, an unprecedented move that legal scholars criticized for circumventing due process (CNN, 2025). His government also granted amnesty to all January



6 riot defendants, further invigorating his populist influence among a disenfranchised base that sees such persons as patriots (Washington Post, 2025). As deeply polarized as the country became, Trump still enjoyed a 77% Republican approval rating, although his overall approval rating fell to 41% by April (Fox News Poll, 2025; Marist, 2025). These actions represent an ongoing deployment of populist discourse—activating "the people" against "the corrupt elite"—but with an increasingly authoritarian populist orientation, as institutional restraints were further eroded and opposition criminalized. Specialists contend that while the populist essence of Trumpism is still present, its 2025 version emphasizes state authority over participatory grievance politics, rendering it "less democratic and more dangerous" (Brookings Institution, 2024; Freedom House, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

The development of Donald Trump's populism between 2016 and 2025 provides a potent lens for making sense of the transformative and destructive possibilities of populist politics. Initially driven by resentment, cultural insecurity, and distrust of the elites, Trump's initial term used populist rhetoric to challenge the status quo. His message spoke powerfully to significant portions of the American electorate who felt ignored by technocratic liberalism and betrayed by globalization. With the promises of economic nationalism, cultural revival, and border security, Trump was able to reshape the Republican Party and rethink the lines of political discourse in America.

But populism's success is also its biggest enemy. Once in office, populists tend to be hemmed in by democratic institutions—courts, bureaucrats, checks and balances, which they begin to see as obstructions to the "will of the people." During Trump's second term, this resulted in a significant move toward authoritarianism. What had started as an anti-elite insurgency became

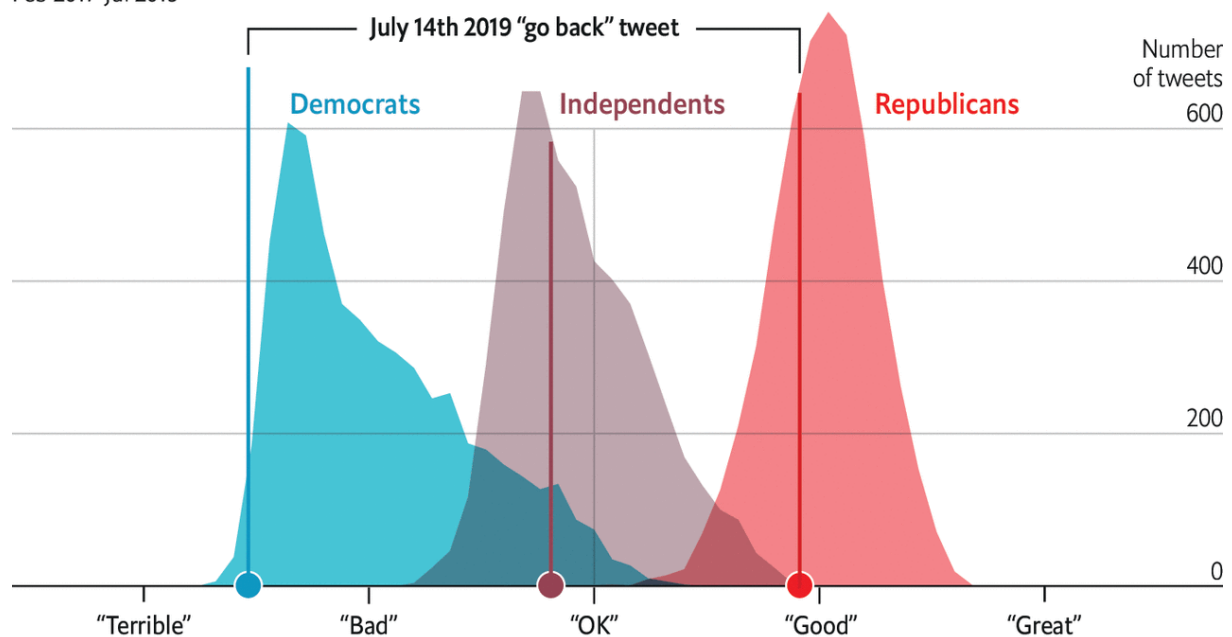
a deliberate attempt to consolidate power, dominate narratives, and erode democratic norms. The state was more and more used to furthering political agendas, opposition was equated with disloyalty, and national identity was defined in narrow terms to exclude the "other."

Populism can spring from genuine grievances, but if not curbed, it is capable of eating away at the very fabric of democratic government. As the United States charts the treacherous course of Trump's second term in office, the task is not only to counter policies but to protect the ethos and essence of democracy itself.

### The good, the bad and the ugly

Opinion of Donald Trump's tweets

Feb 2017-Jul 2019



Source: YouGov

The Economist

Figure 6: Trump's tweet divides Americans, [Source: The Economist](#)

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