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Fear, Grievance, and the Other

How Authoritarian Populist Politics Thrive in Contemporary Democracies

Key concepts to understand politics beyond the left-right paradigm

Miriam Juan-Torres González



The Democracy & Belonging Forum is a network and research hub that aims to counter democratic degradation, reduce fragmentation and mistrust, and oppose authoritarian populism in Europe and the US by connecting and supporting leaders in both regions who are committed to bridging across lines of difference while advancing belonging for marginalized groups. The Forum is a project of the Othering & Belonging Institute.

The Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, advances groundbreaking research, policy, and ideas that examine and remediate the processes of exclusion, marginalization, and structural inequality—what we call othering—to build a world based on inclusion, fairness, justice, and care for the earth—what we call belonging.

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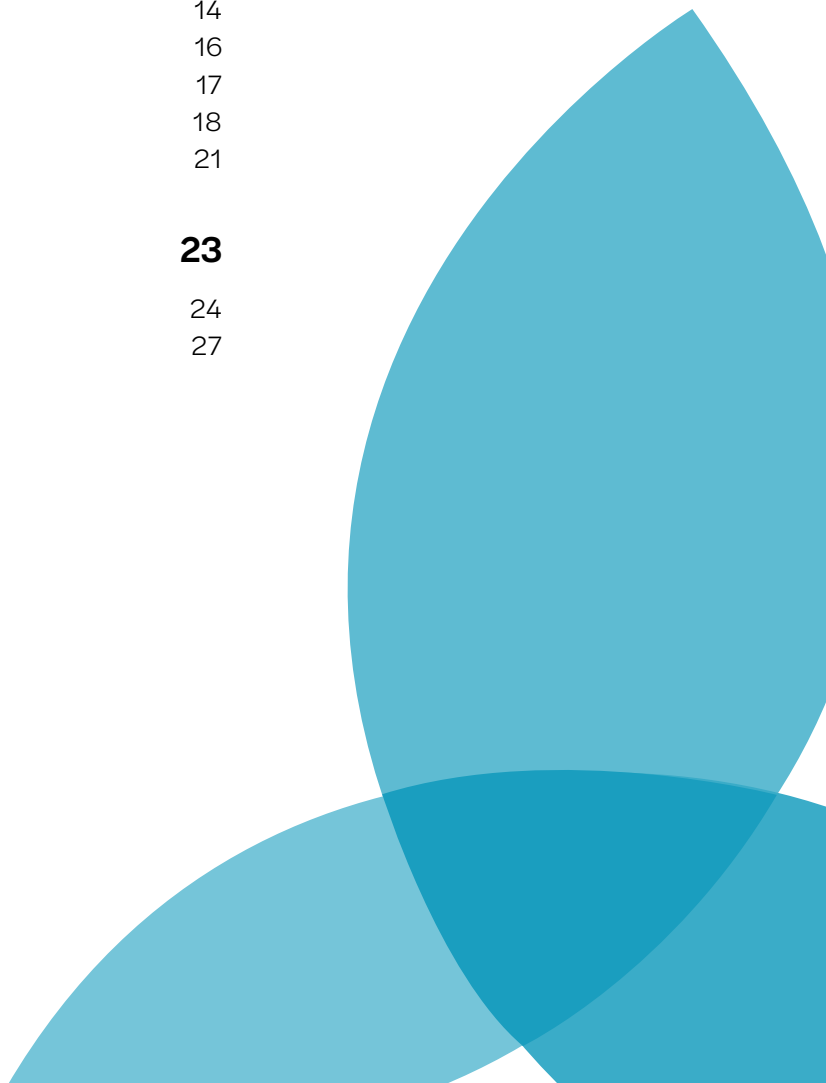
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The goal of this paper is to provide a primer on key concepts **that help us understand the rise, strategies, and tactics of exclusionary, nativist, and populist movements today**, and to advance the framework of authoritarian populism as an analytical tool that informs practical efforts to combat these movements, address structural marginality, and advance democracies rooted in belonging. This framework is proposed as one way of understanding current politics that brings into focus strategies and tactics; an analytical category that invites us to reflect on how these movements pull from both authoritarian and populist playbooks and weaponize fear, democratic processes, and othering to their advantage.

The aim of the study is not to provide an exhaustive literature review of each of the terms nor a definitive definition or lens through which to approach the current political moment. We recognize that there are significant and lively debates in academia on a range of contested concepts, such as far right, populism, authoritarian populism, and democracy. We also note that from a practitioner's perspective there are arguments to be made for centering different characteristics of exclusionary, nativist, and populist movements, be it their populism or their strong authoritarian tendencies.

Contents

Introduction	1
Populism	6
Authoritarianism	10
Authoritarianism in Political Science	10
Authoritarianism in Social Psychology	12
Authoritarian Practices	14
Fascism	16
Totalitarianism	17
Liberal Democracy and Illiberalism	18
Democratic Recession, Erosion, Backsliding?	21
Authoritarian Populism	23
Far Right	24
Authoritarian Populism as a Framework	27



Introduction

The recent success of authoritarian populist movements (often referred to as far right) in Europe, the United States, and across the world has generated an explosion of interest in terms such as “populism,” “fascism,” and “authoritarianism.” Renewed attention in both academic circles and public discourse means that such terms have become popular in common parlance, yet they often refer to different political phenomena or to diverse aspects of them. While each of these concepts can serve as a useful heuristic for the complex reality we are facing and can help us understand how nativist, exclusionary, and populist movements continue to gain power and influence, they fall short when trying to comprehend authoritarian populists’ worldviews and the array of strategies and tactics that these movements use in democratic contexts, as well as how to counter them.

These movements employ authoritarian tactics such as targeting minorities and attempting to control and erode democratic institutions, but they rarely exhibit all the characteristics that academics have considered core to authoritarian regimes. In most of the countries where authoritarian populism is succeeding, there is still room for political contestation, such as Poland and India, as was seen in recent elections. By using potent populist rhetoric, they are effectively stoking fear and division among the general electorate and managing to convince large segments of the voting population, capitalizing on anti-establishment sentiment, to paradoxically support their illiberal ideas. Unlike authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, authoritarian populist actors generally criticize elites, present as antisystem, and claim to speak in the name of popular sovereignty and democracy, even if they often (though not always) deliberately pursue strategies to undermine them.

We believe that authoritarian populism, as we define it below, is the framework best suited to help us understand contemporary nativist, exclusionary, and populist politics, particularly in Europe, North America, and other countries that could be considered democracies or hybrid regimes. As authoritarian populists pull both from authoritarian and populist playbooks, using this framework can help support the efforts of civic actors working to counter antidemocratic movements and pursue belonging without othering, whether via narrative strategy, policy work, or grassroots organizing.

As we define it:

- * **Authoritarian populism** is a form of politics that combines features of populism and authoritarianism and is fueled by nativism (favoring “native” citizens over “outsiders”) and anti-pluralism (opposition to diversity). Authoritarian populist leaders cultivate and exploit fear of change and perceived ‘Others’ (often defined in racialized, ethnic, religious, or caste terms) to justify practices that limit political competition and accountability, all while claiming to defend a version of democracy that prioritizes majority rule over minority rights.
- * **Authoritarian populists** create a strong sense of in-group identity rooted in othering to shape how people perceive social and political issues. This identity, which helps delimit who is considered “native,” is reinforced by framing the world as a competition between two opposing, homogeneous groups:
 - + **‘The true people’** — whom the leader claims to represent—against a vaguely defined ‘elite’ associated with the establishment. [Populist dimension]
 - + **An exclusionary ‘us’** — depicted as uniformly good and in competition against a flattened and essentialized and bad ‘them’ or ‘Other,’ often defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or caste, and portrayed as a threat to the ‘us.’ [Authoritarian dimension]

In this definition of authoritarian populism, no reference is made to left- or right-wing ideologies, as it stays neutral as to whether or how to use this paradigm to understand strategies and tactics that conceptually could be found on both the right and the left. However, currently authoritarian populism is a mode of politics used primarily among parties considered far right and often self-identified as alt-right. Recent events in places such as Germany, however, suggest that it could also be found among political leaders that come from a left-wing heritage (the new German party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht [BSW], a splinter of the far-left Die Linke, has positioned itself as strongly antimigrant).¹

While the focus is often on political leaders and parties, we also recognize that the phenomenon goes far beyond those who most embody party politics and electoral competition. In fact, we could think about politicians and parties in terms of their place within broader movements that focus on actions outside elections, actions aimed at changing society from outside the traditional political arena.

At the core of modern authoritarian populist movements’ strategies is *othering*, which includes the use of scapegoating tactics to both reinforce hierarchical and supremacist beliefs but also to present perceived out-groups as a threat that must be rooted out through all means, including via authoritarian and antidemocratic practices that allow them to consolidate power and become even less accountable when perpetuating inequality and violence.²

1 J. Philipp Thomeczek, “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian—and Populist? An Empirical Analysis,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, May 28, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00544-z>.

2 John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, “The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging,” in *Othering and Belonging Journal* 1, (2016), <https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>.

“ We believe that something is missed when authoritarianism and liberal democracy are situated as two diametrically opposed poles.

This dichotomy fails to acknowledge that liberal values are not mutually exclusive with authoritarian practices. ”

Liberal democracies have often been lauded as the best alternative to authoritarianism, as a type of society that protects fundamental rights and freedom and maintains rule of law and separation of powers. Yet othering occurs across different political regimes and is often coterminous with in-group formation. We believe it is important to recognize that no existing society—including those considered liberal democracies—has been devoid of the violent ways of othering that disproportionately target marginalized communities.

Consistent with some post-colonial approaches to authoritarianism and in contrast to some canonical political scientists discussed below, we believe that something is missed when authoritarianism and liberal democracy are situated as two diametrically opposed poles.³ This dichotomy fails to acknowledge that liberal values are not mutually exclusive with authoritarian practices (see section titled “Authoritarian Practices” on page 14).⁴ A liberal democratic state can on occasion or against specific populations use authoritarian practices and still fail to fit the authoritarian mold. Yet it should be equally examined for its use of antidemocratic or authoritarian tactics—especially as often these practices are wielded against marginalized groups who are not considered, at best, part of the “us” or, at worst, fully human. For years, so-called liberal democracies have continued to rely on authoritarian practices to manage its “undesirables,” who, in Achille Mbembe’s terms, have been excluded from the concept of the “human” and categorized as waste.⁵ Nowhere is this more evident than in the European Union’s deplorable migration policy, fully embodied in the recent New Pact on Migration and Asylum,⁶ a policy framework that bankrolls authoritarians, treats migrants as commodities, and whose ethos has resulted in the deadliest migratory route in the world.⁷ Similarly, “racial authoritarianism has been central to citizenship and governance of race-class subjugated communities throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries,”⁸ as has been well-documented in the United States.

Having reviewed the literature, we believe that understanding the concepts presented here and using the framework of authoritarian populism—as opposed to simply authoritarianism, fascism, or populism—can best inform practical efforts that pursue social justice and aim to build democracies of belonging without othering. Today, authoritarian populists use both populist and authoritarian tactics, mostly combined and pursued in strategically advantageous ways. Populist appeals are invoked as a justification mechanism for illiberal and often undemocratic practices, but populism alone cannot help us understand the substance of the nativist and exclusionary political project. As mentioned, authoritarianism is often used to refer to a type of regime (or in social psychology, to a series of personality traits). Conceiving of authoritarianism not only as a political system but as a set of practices via this updated terminology can help us understand how authoritarian practices are used in systems that do not fit the description of an authoritarian state or in countries that may be evolving into previously unseen regime types.⁹

The concept of populism has been the subject of much debate in academia. While some authors think of it as a strategy (rhetorical or more broadly), others view it as an ideology or as a schema.¹⁰ While most scholars seem to agree that it is possible to conceive of both left- and right-wing populism,¹¹ others believe that by its

3 Pedro Salgado, “Embedded Authoritarianism, Sovereignty, Coloniality, and Democracy in Latin America,” in *Global Authoritarianism: Perspectives and Contestations from the South*, 1st ed., 132, Edition Politik (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2022).

4 Marlies Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is...and Is Not: a Practice Perspective,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 515–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iy060>.

5 Achille Mbembe, “Democracy as a Community of Life,” in *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, edited by John W. De Gruchy, 1st ed., 187–94, African Sun Media (2011), <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920338633/3-1>.

6 The New Pact places an emphasis on the economic interests of the Union, encourages externalization of integration practices, and focuses on return and reintegration processes. The New Pact is built on the ideas of securitization, externalization, and prevention, with barely any influence or mention of humanitarian and human rights concerns. Human rights groups have called the Pact an ill-functioning, costly, and cruel system. As foreseen in the new regulations, human rights standards to assess asylum claims will be lowered for the sake of expediency, while the pact heavily relies on agreements with authoritarian countries to prevent arrivals. See more at Miriam Juan-Torres González, “Diving into Migration’s Narrative Ocean,” *Democracy & Belonging Forum*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.democracyandbelongingforum.org/forum-blog/migrations-narrative-ocean> and “Migration Policy: the Trojan Horse of Authoritarian Practices,” *Democracy & Belonging Forum*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.democracyandbelongingforum.org/forum-blog/migration-policy-the-trojan-horse-of-authoritarian-practices>.

7 “Missing Migrants Project,” International Organization for Migration, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

8 Vesla M. Weaver and Gwen Prowse, “Racial authoritarianism in U.S. democracy,” *Science* 369, no. 6508, (September 2020), 1176–1178, doi: 10.1126/science.abd7669.

9 For a comprehensive review of political system taxonomies, see Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Repr. (Boulder: Rienner, 2009).

10 See for example Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “The Global Dimensions of Populist Nationalism,” *The International Spectator* 54, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 17–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1592870> or Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

11 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing

nature, populism is always exclusionary in ways only consistent with right-wing ideology.¹² Nonetheless, most agree that populism on its own is largely devoid of content and needs a “host ideology.”¹³

The intellectual background to the notion of authoritarian populism can be found in the writings of Jamaican British cultural studies scholar and activist Stuart Hall. In his 1979 essay “The Great Moving Right Show,” Hall defined authoritarian populism as an exceptional form of the capitalist state, which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place, and which at the same time has been able to construct around itself an active popular consent.¹⁴

Since the late 1970s, the theorization and use of “authoritarian populism” has evolved. Some, such as academic Bojan Bugarcic, seem to perceive authoritarian populism as a type of populism.¹⁵ The scholars from the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC) that gathered to provide Global South perspectives on authoritarianism, seem to view authoritarian populism as authoritarianism under a different guise.¹⁶

The expression “far right” is an umbrella term that includes movements considered to fit within either the radical right or the extreme right (see section titled “Far Right” on page 24 for discussion on the distinction).¹⁷ Generally, far right is used to refer to those actors and movements considered as authoritarian populists. Indeed, as stated above, we believe that the predominant form that authoritarian populism takes is currently on the far right (or applies to those often self-described as “alt-right”), but far right is also a misnomer, insofar as many of these movements do not fully conform to a right-wing worldview. Some, such as the Dutch Party for Freedom, espouse homonationalism, including gay citizens among those needing protection from the dangers of Islam, its main other.¹⁸ Often, these exclusionary, nativist, and populist movements do not conform to traditional economic conservative doxa, with economic stances that vary from neoliberal to economic protectionism or left-wing-oriented social policy.¹⁹

To better support the practical efforts of the Democracy & Belonging Forum and the wider democracy and belonging ecosystem, we believe that conceiving of authoritarian populism as a mode of politics (characterized by a range of elements discussed later in the paper)—not as a regime type—will shed more light on the strategies of leaders operating in so-called liberal democracies,²⁰ such as Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Marine Le Pen, Jair Bolsonaro, or Giorgia Meloni, as well as other extremist actors and movements.

This framework of authoritarian populism builds on the existing academic literature as well as analysis of contemporary movements and shares conceptual features with other theories. The framework does not pretend to be definitive but advances a useful analytical lens that can be complemented and overlaid with other frameworks (such as the Othering & Belonging Institute’s Othering and Belonging framework).²¹ It is also flexible enough that it does not preclude recognizing when authoritarian populists adopt elements from other types of regimes, ideologies, or strategies without fully meeting the criteria that would categorize them as such

Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 147–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.

12 Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

13 Muddy, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 541–63.

14 Stuart Hall, “The Great Moving Right Show,” *Marxism Today* (January 1979), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220h4g.14>.

15 Bojan Bugarcic, “The Two Faces of Populism: Between Authoritarian and Democratic Populism,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (April 2019): 390–400, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.20>.

16 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, ed., *Global Authoritarianism: Perspectives and Contestations from the South*, 1st ed., 132, Edition Politik (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.14361/978383839462096>.

17 Andrea L. P. Pirro, “Far Right: The Significance of an Umbrella Concept,” *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 1 (January 2023): 101–12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860>.

18 Niels Spierings, “Homonationalism and Voting for the Populist Radical Right: Addressing Unanswered Questions by Zooming in on the Dutch Case,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 33, no. 1 (April 6, 2021): 171–82, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaa005>.

19 Bugarcic, “The Two Faces of Populism.”

20 William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 5–19.

21 Othering and Belonging Institute, “All resources,” last accessed October 7, 2024, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/resources>.

(for example, fascist components). In fact, we argue that it is the specific dynamic interplay between authoritarian and populist tactics that is, in part, contributing to these movements getting such traction.

On one hand, many elements of authoritarian populist movements—and their strategies—are similar across the world: they share an “underlying ideology of cultural hegemony and a monolithic nationalist identity often leading to a widespread program of racism, xenophobia, and gender-based regional and religious antagonism.”²² Yet on the other, we recognize that they need to be locally contextualized, with the unique political, economic, and sociocultural realities of each place integrated into any analytical or programmatic efforts.²³ In the words of the IRGAC:

Learning from other places is important in order to build common counter-strategies that can reverberate in the region and, hopefully, lead to consolidation and continuation. The current phase of authoritarianism is not the sum of simply coincidental events but reflects the level of sharing and collaboration between various actors, especially on the far right.²⁴

This brief aims to offer an overview of the main debates on key political frameworks and definitions. First, we explore some of the most influential contemporary models of populism. Second, we present an overview of the key literature on authoritarianism from the fields of political science and social psychology, and brief summaries of the concepts of fascism and totalitarianism. Given their relation to authoritarianism and populism, a brief overview of key definitions of liberal democracy, illiberalism, and democratic backsliding is then provided. Finally, we introduce the intellectual background of the concept of authoritarian populism, followed by our own analysis on the key components that characterize it and define it.

We acknowledge that the literature covering these political phenomena suffers from the usual academic biases that plague the social sciences (and most of the literature reviewed is originally in English). The goal of this brief is not to exhaustively examine all the literature on each of the terms. Rather, its purpose is to inquire into the different approaches and understandings that will help us devise strategies and tactics to confront the surge of authoritarian populism and contribute toward building democracies rooted in belonging without othering.

22 Ayesha Masood and Muhammad Azfar Nisar, “Speaking out: A Postcolonial Critique of the Academic Discourse on Far-Right Populism,” *Organization* 27, no. 1 (January 2020): 162–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508419828572>.

23 Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Tatiana Vargas-Maia, “Why We Need a New Framework to Study the Far Right in the Global South,” *Global Dialogue*, March 9, 2023, <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/why-we-need-a-new-framework-to-study-the-far-right-in-the-global-south>.

24 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, ed., *Global Authoritarianism*.

Populism

In recent times, “populism” has become one of the most frequently overused political terms; invoked in both academic circles and public discourse, it is used to describe contemporary global politics that are widely divergent—especially in Europe and North America following Brexit and Donald J. Trump’s 2016 election—leading to widespread confusion about its definition and relevance.²⁵

As a contested term, “populism” is debated among scholars as either an ideology (a system of ideas and beliefs), a sociocultural phenomenon (as a form of political relationship between leaders and followers), as a strategy or form of political mobilization, or as a discursive style.²⁶ There is also disagreement on whether populism can morph into or attach to different modes of governance (for example, illiberal and authoritarian or inclusive and democratic), whether populism at its core is always exclusionary, and whether it can be both right-wing and left-wing or only the former. Generally, however, most recent literature treats it as a thin ideology or focuses on populism as a discursive style that can be found on both the left and the right.

The dominant theoretical framework, particularly in Europe, is found in the influential work of Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde. Mudde provides a minimal definition of populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”²⁷ Mudde argues that one of the advantages of conceiving populism as an ideology is that it can work as an umbrella for different perspectives.²⁸

Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Ioannis Andreadis also define populism as an ideology or set of ideas, namely, as discourse that sees politics in Manichaeian terms as a struggle between the people, which is the embodiment of democratic virtue; and a corrupt establishment.²⁹

Others, such as the scholars that follow, challenge the accuracy of raising populism to the level of ideology, even if a thin one that needs to attach itself to another set of ideas to give it more substance and direction.

Paris Aslanidis proposes conceiving of populism as discourse and proposes applying framing theory to study populist discourse.³⁰ Frames are conceived as schemata of interpretation, that enable the selection of a specific perspective to interpret experience. Applied to populism, Aslanidis argues that populist discourse can be

25 Nineteenth century author James Fenimore Cooper discussed populism as differentiated from demagoguery, one distinguished from the other in that the demagogue threatens or outright breaks established rules of conduct, institutions, and even the law. For more, see John a. Powell and Stephen Menéndian, *Belonging Without Otherring*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024), 96–97. According to research by scholar Rogers Brubaker, “the first scholarly discussions of small-p populism—as distinguished from Populism as a specifically American agrarian movement of the late nineteenth century or from Russian Narodnischestvo, generally if problematically translated as Populism—emerged only in the 1950s. See Rogers Brubaker, “Populism and Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (January 2020): 44–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12522>.

26 Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2013), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2459387>.

27 Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 541–63.

28 Ibid.

29 Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Ioannis Andreadis, “The Activation of Populist Attitudes,” *Government and Opposition* 55, no. 2 (April 2020): 283–307, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.23>.

30 Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 suppl. (April 2016): 88–104, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224>.

perceived as:

the systematic dissemination of a frame that diagnoses reality as problematic because ‘corrupt elites’ have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the ‘noble People’ and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization of the latter in order to regain power. This, therefore, can be labeled the ‘populist frame’—the ‘subatomic matter’ that constitutes populist discourse.³¹

Cynthia Miller-Idriss’s work similarly advocates for thinking about populism as:

a strategy (whether political tactic or rhetorical frame), but also as what cognitive science scholarship has called schemata—the mental, internal frameworks that act as filters to help us interpret the information we encounter on a daily basis. [...] Populist schemata (ways of thinking) and rhetorical strategies work in conjunction with ideological claims across the political spectrum. In this sense, populism is a rhetorical strategy to help achieve ideological goals. Populist schemata help individuals interpret the ideological stances they encounter, and also shape their reactions to those ideological stances.³²

As a strategy, Kurt Weyland describes populism as emerging “when personalistic leaders base their rule on massive yet mostly uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of people.”³³ Hans-Georg Betz specifies it as a rhetorical strategy (instead of more broadly), as “primarily a political strategy, whose political rhetoric is the evocation of latent grievances and the appeal to emotions provoked by them.”³⁴

In Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski’s literature review on varieties of populism, they also cite Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009) as proponents of an understanding of populism “as characteristic of political talk rather than as an identity of political actors. In their view, this approach to populism changes how we evaluate parties or actors, as it is no longer whether a party is populist or not but the degree to which it is, whether a party has more populist characteristics or fewer.”³⁵

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart describe populism as a “style of rhetoric reflecting first order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites. It remains silent about second-order principles concerning what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made.”³⁶

Most of the literature on populism focuses on a vertical relationship between elites and the people, whether it conceives of populism as an ideology, schema, or strategy. In that sense, Rogers Brubaker’s work stands out as he advances populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire that is better understood in relation to a two-dimensional vision, defined by the intersection of vertical (elites versus people) and horizontal oppositions (people versus those at the bottom, insiders, and outsiders).³⁷ The repertoire includes several elements: the focus on “the people;” antagonistic repoliticization; majoritarianism; anti-institutionalism; and protectionism.³⁸ In Brubaker’s view, it is the combination of elements that is characteristic of populism not the presence of one of them.

31 Aslandis, “Is Populism an Ideology?”

32 Miller-Idriss, “The Global Dimensions of Populist Nationalism.”

33 Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (October 2001): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>.

34 Daniel Rueda, “Is Populism a Political Strategy? A Critique of an Enduring Approach,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 2 (May 2021): 167–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720962355>.

35 Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda,” Working Paper Series no.13-0004 (Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2013), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/gidron_bonikowski_populismlitreview_2013.pdf.

36 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

37 Brubaker, “Why Populism?”

38 Ibid.

“ Is populism always exclusionary or are there forms of inclusionary populism?

Is it only found on the right-wing or also on the left? ”

Is populism always exclusionary or are there forms of inclusionary populism? Is it only found on the right-wing or also on the left? Most scholars seem to agree that populism can attach to different ideologies and be both inclusionary and exclusionary, but there are exceptions.

Jan-Werner Müller argues that populism's core is a rejection of pluralism, insisting that antielite orientations are a necessary but not sufficient part of populism.³⁹ According to Müller, populism is not only antielite but also antipluralist:

Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent people [...] The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly moral. When running for office, populists portray their political competitors as part of the immoral, corrupt elite; when ruling, they refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate.⁴⁰

In Brubaker's theorization, it will depend on how "the people" is defined in the horizontal dimension (elites versus the people is the vertical dimension; the people versus an outsider is the horizontal dimension). The people are at the core of the populist repertoire, but as an idea it is an ambiguous notion with at least three meanings: common or ordinary people (plebs), people as sovereign (demos), or the culturally or ethnically distinct people (nation or ethnos).⁴¹ If the populist is defining the people as the latter, a politics of cultural or ethnic nationalism follow.

Brubaker argues that right- and left-wing populism are set apart by their differing definitions of "the people" and "the other" in the horizontal relationship of populist discourse:

Left-wing populism construes the bounded collectivity in economic or political terms and identifies the threatening outside with unfettered trade, unregulated globalization, the European Union, or (especially in Latin America) American imperialism. Right-wing populism construes the people as a culturally or ethnically bounded collectivity with a shared and distinctive way of life and sees that collectivity as threatened by outside groups or forces (including internal outsiders: those living on the inside who, even when they are citizens of the state, are not seen as belonging, or fully belonging, to the nation).⁴²

Mudde and Kaltwasser also insist that populism is not intrinsically tied to either left- or right-wing political ideology, and create a distinction between exclusionary versus inclusionary populism.⁴³ Bugarcic posits that "there exist several rather different varieties of populism: agrarian, socio-economic, xenophobic, reactionary, authoritarian and progressive populism."⁴⁴

Bugaric argues that while authoritarian populism is currently the most prevalent form of populism, a democratic and antiestablishment populism is also possible, which combines elements of liberal and democratic conviction (this category would include Spain's Podemos party, Greece's Syriza, the Left party in Germany, the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, and American politicians Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez).⁴⁵ This interpretation follows from Paul Taggart's understanding of populism as chameleonlike, ever adapting to the colors of its environment.⁴⁶

39 Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

40 Ibid.

41 Brubaker, "Why Populism?"

42 Ibid.

43 Mudde and Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America."

44 Bugarcic, "The Two Faces of Populism."

45 Ibid.

46 Paul A. Taggart, *Populism* (Open University Press, 2000).

Populism at a Glance

<p>As an ideology</p>	<p>“A thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the <i>volonté générale</i> (general will) of the people.” (Mudde)</p>
<p>As a schema or discourse</p>	<p>An internal mental framework that serves as a filter through which we interpret reality; one that “diagnoses reality as problematic because ‘corrupt elites’ have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the ‘noble People’ and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization of the latter in order to regain power.” (Aslanidis and Miller-Idriss)</p>
<p>As a discursive and intellectual repertoire</p>	<p>Populism emerging when the following are combined: focus on “the people,” antagonistic repoliticization, majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, and protectionism. (Brubaker)</p>
<p>As a sociocultural phenomenon</p>	<p>A form of political relationship between leaders and followers.</p>
<p>As a characteristic of political talk</p>	<p>Populism seen as a style or rhetoric rather than as an identity of political actors. This allows us to evaluate the <i>degree</i> to which a political actor is a populist, not just whether someone is a populist or not. (Deegan-Krause and Haughton)</p>
<p>As a strategy</p>	<p>Political rhetoric that evokes “latent grievances and the appeal to emotions provoked by them.” (Betz)</p>
<p>As left- or right-wing</p>	<p>For most scholars, populism can be found both on the left or the right and is not intrinsically good or bad.</p>
<p>As inclusionary or exclusionary</p>	<p>Populism on its own does not tell us much in terms of the nature of the ideology or program that the populist would pursue, nor the risks to social justice and democracy inherent in adopting populist strategies.</p>

Authoritarianism

Interest in the study of authoritarianism intensified in the twentieth century, driven by the rise of fascist regimes in Europe and the devastation of the world wars. Authors such as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Karl Popper, Juan José Linz, and Guillermo O'Donnell started to develop their theoretical frameworks in an effort to understand the appeal of fascism, as well as the institutions and structures that supported it (see theoretical discussion below). Nonetheless, fascism came to be understood as a form of authoritarianism, but not its only manifestation.

Within the social sciences, the study of authoritarianism is approached mainly, though not exclusively, through the academic disciplines of political science and social or political psychology. Both touch on similar characteristics of the phenomenon (the role of authority, homogeneity, and control), and although each discipline contains a plurality of approaches, political science often focuses on authoritarianism as a mode of governance or regime type, while social or political psychology studies authoritarianism at the individual level, with a focus on values and personality traits.

Authoritarianism in Political Science

Despite much attention in the political science literature to authoritarian regimes and its leaders, there currently isn't a widely accepted definition of the concept. Adding to the elusiveness of the concept, authoritarianism usually has a negative category definition, as it is often described as a lack of democracy rather than for what it is on its own or its substance (even though not all nondemocratic regimes would be deemed as authoritarian, as they could be, for example, totalitarian or sultanistic).⁴⁷ The fact that there isn't a consensual definition or a single general theory of democracy further compounds this conceptual cloud.⁴⁸

Sociologist and political scientist Juan José Linz,⁴⁹ whose taxonomy of regime types is often referenced, characterized authoritarianism as having four main qualities:

- * Limited and not responsible political pluralism, with constraints on the legislature, political parties, and interest groups (power is concentrated and centralized)
- * Political legitimacy based upon appeals to emotion and identification of the regime as an evil to necessarily combat easily recognizable problems

⁴⁷ See Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Repr. (Boulder: Rienner, 2009) and Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is... and Is Not."

⁴⁸ Democratic theory is a vast field, with significant contestation about the key components of democracy, how narrow or wide the definition of democracy should be, and how it interacts with other concepts such as liberalism. While some scholars argue that certain rights are a precondition of democracy, others disagree, focusing on a narrower understanding of democracy. Despite multiple areas of disagreement, two theorists stand out as advancing the dominant strands of Western democratic thought. More than five decades ago, Joseph Schumpeter proposed a narrow definition of democracy—more proceduralist—as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote, thus focusing primarily on elections. Robert A. Dahl's theorization of democracy is more expansive. According to him, democracy is not purely about elections; it also entails respect for freedom of expression, access to information, and freedom of association. In Dahl's theory of polyarchy (or polyarchal democracy), a democracy is a system where the following elements are present: clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, elected executive, freedom of expression, and availability of sources of information. Dahl also argued that democracy's fundamental principle is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, and all citizens being considered political equals. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, & Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

⁴⁹ Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

- * Minimal political mobilization and suppression of opposition activities (power is often maintained by political repression and exclusion of challengers)
- * Ill-defined executive powers, vague and shifting, which expand the powers of the executive

Scholars such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat—in consonance with the last of Linz’s quality—define authoritarianism as a political system where executive power is asserted at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of government.⁵⁰

Authoritarianism refers to a specific dynamic of authority and power, where those in positions of control—such as government officials, bureaucrats, and party leaders, whether in formal or informal roles—exercise dominance over individuals under their rule, such as members, followers, or supporters. This authority is typically imposed, rather than established through voluntary consent.⁵¹

Generally, authoritarian states lack free and fair elections, even though they may celebrate them as a facade, and may contain “nominally democratic institutions, such as political parties, legislatures and elections, which are managed to entrench authoritarian rule; thus, a dictatorship can feature fraudulent, non-competitive elections.”⁵²

As Barbara Geddes notes, different kinds of authoritarianism exist, which in turn influences how regimes may succeed or break down.⁵³ Geddes identifies four main types of authoritarianism: military (a group of officers decides who will rule and influences policy), single party (one party dominates access to political office and controls policy, though other parties may legally exist), personalist (access to office and the fruits of office depends on the discretion of an individual leader), or amalgams of the pure types.

The IRGAC brought together a group of scholars, activists, and researchers from the Global South to analyze the different faces of authoritarianism in the South. In their published work, they note that “a critical global perspective on authoritarianism implies both to acknowledge its inherent inscription and embeddedness in (post)colonial capitalist states and societies, and to think of it in historically and geographically specific terms.” Most of the European and North American literature, however, does not refer to colonialism nor focuses on neoliberalism within its theorization of authoritarianism or democracy.⁵⁴

IRGAC scholars seem to follow the perspective of Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes, who pointed out, that under capitalist democracy, the “authoritarian element is intrinsically a structural and dynamic component of preservation, strengthening and expansion of the ‘capitalist democratic system’.”⁵⁵

Scholar Jennifer Gandhi has investigated the historical record of autocracies who use multiparty elections. According to her findings, a long historical view reveals that the electoral inactivity of autocracies during the Cold War was rare, and most authoritarian regimes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries held multiparty elections.⁵⁶ In that sense, the use of elections or lack thereof to separate between democracies and autocratic regimes is not straightforward or that useful.

50 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).

51 Günter Frankenberg, “Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarianism: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism,” *The Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2, no. 1 (2022): 1-15.

52 “Authoritarianism,” European Center for Populism Studies, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/authoritarianism/>.

53 Barbara Geddes, “Authoritarian Breakdown,” University of California San Diego, 2004, https://pages.ucsd.edu/~mnaoi/page4/POLI227/files/page1_11.pdf

54 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, *Global Authoritarianism*.

55 Ibid.

56 Jennifer Gandhi, “Elections and Political Regimes,” *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 3 (July 2015): 446–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2015.11>.

Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik have investigated the role that institutions play on the survival or demise of dictatorships. Their research reveals that under certain conditions, institutions can promote the survival of a dictatorship by facilitating power-sharing. Dictators may opt to include certain opposition members in institutions for regular interaction in high-level, deliberative, and decision-making bodies, given that inclusion can become an incentive that deters stronger opposition. Taking part in institutions allows for wider alliances in power and precludes destabilizing conflicts initiated by other elites.⁵⁷

Gandhi and Elvin Ong have explored the role of opposition coalition formation in the transition to democracy.⁵⁸ While electoral coalitions of diverse groups provide the best chance of ousting authoritarian regimes, their research shows that voters' support for such coalitions is highly sensitive to the anticipated outcomes of the victory. Voters may withdraw their support if they believe the coalition will be led by a party or leader they do not prefer or if they fear the coalition could implement some policies they oppose. Voters may withdraw support for the coalition even if its success would mean the removal of the autocratic regime.⁵⁹

Competitive Authoritarianism

Levitsky and Way are proponents of advancing a definition of one particular type of “hybrid regime,” competitive authoritarianism (a hybrid regime combines characteristics of different regime types).⁶⁰ According to the authors, “In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”⁶¹

Competitive authoritarian regimes, however, fall short of full-scale authoritarianism. Incumbents may manipulate democratic rules, but they are:

unable to eliminate them or reduce them to a mere facade. Rather than openly violating democratic rules (for example, by banning or repressing the opposition and the media), incumbents are more likely to use bribery, co-optation, and more subtle forms of persecution, such as the use of tax authorities, compliant judiciaries, and other state agencies to ‘legally’ harass, persecute, or extort cooperative behavior from critics. [...] As a result of the persistence of meaningful democratic institutions in competitive authoritarian regimes, arenas of contestation exist through which opposition forces may periodically challenge, weaken, and occasionally even defeat autocratic incumbents.⁶²

According to Levitsky and Way, in competitive authoritarian regimes, there are still four arenas through which opposition forces can challenge those in power: **1)** the electoral arena, **2)** the legislature, **3)** the judiciary, and **4)** the media.⁶³

Authoritarianism in Social Psychology

In social psychology, authoritarianism is conceptualized either as a particular individual personality trait, a set of personality predispositions, or learned cultural values. Theodor Adorno and Bob Altemeyer are perhaps the most well-known

57 Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (April 2013): 300–316, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613000029>.

58 Jennifer Gandhi and Elvin Ong, “Committed or Conditional Democrats? Opposition Dynamics in Electoral Autocracies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 4 (October 2019): 948–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12441>.

59 Ibid.

60 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 51–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026>.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

“ Generally, authoritarian states lack free and fair elections, even though they may celebrate them as a facade. ”

theorists of the psychology of authoritarianism, even though their theories have been built on and significantly contested.⁶⁴ In his seminal book *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno posited that authoritarianism is a personality trait characterized by conventionalism (adherence to conventional values), authoritarian submission (placing high value on obedience and respect for authority), and authoritarian aggression (punitive attitudes toward those who deviate from conventional values).⁶⁵ Altemeyer developed our understanding of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), focusing on the personality measures that predominate in this type of authoritarian personality as opposed to nonconservative authoritarianism.⁶⁶ More recently, psychologists speak of authoritarianism as related to personality but better understood as a set of related beliefs.

One of the most prominent contemporary scholars of authoritarianism, Karen Stenner, developed a framework that shifts attention from psychological or personality traits to what she calls the authoritarian dynamic, which brings personality together with context and environment, rather than attention to the authoritarian predisposition on its own.⁶⁷ In Stenner's work, the authoritarian dynamic is composed of two elements: an individual predisposition (concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity and with individual autonomy and diversity) and a normative threat. The dynamic is triggered when events perceived as threatening activate the authoritarian predisposition, which manifests in the triad of racial, political, and moral intolerance.⁶⁸

In Stenner's research, the authoritarian predisposition is called authoritarianism because "suppression of difference and achievement of uniformity necessitate autocratic social arrangements in which individual autonomy yields to group authority."⁶⁹ Those who have a higher authoritarian predisposition thus have more difficulty with change and diversity and a preference for oneness and sameness. According to Stenner, about 30 percent of the population in each country has an authoritarian predisposition, but it is not always manifested in intolerance, as for it to activate it needs to interact with a sense of threat (real or symbolic).⁷⁰

Stenner and Jonathan Haidt have applied their frameworks to the analysis of contemporary far-right movements. In their view, the surge of far-right movements "represents the activation of authoritarian predispositions (in the roughly one-third of any population who are so inclined) by perceptions of 'normative threat' (put most simply: threats to unity and consensus, or 'oneness and sameness')."⁷¹

To measure authoritarian predisposition, scholars often use a series of questions related to childrearing.⁷² According to Matthew MacWilliams, who has repeatedly used these questions in the US context to test to what extent Trump's authoritarian us-versus-them rhetoric influences his appeal among voters, "these questions tap deep-seated preconceptions about children and child rearing: whether it is more important for a child to be respectful or independent, obedient or self-reliant, well-behaved or considerate, and well-mannered or curious."⁷³ In consonance with Stenner's understanding of the authoritarian predisposition, MacWilliams also claims that authoritarianism is a predisposition that arises causally prior to the political attitudes and behavior that it affects.⁷⁴

64 Over the years, Adorno's methodology has engendered significant controversy and has been challenged for its reliance on empirically questionable Freudian presumptions.

65 Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brenswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

66 Joseph H. Manson, "Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Left-Wing Authoritarianism, and Pandemic-Mitigation Authoritarianism," *Personality and Individual Differences* 167 (December 2020): 110251, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110251>.

67 Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt, "Authoritarianism is not a momentary madness, but an eternal dynamic within liberal democracies," in *Can it happen here? Authoritarianism in America*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein, (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018).

72 Andrew M. Engelhardt, Stanley Feldman, and Marc J. Hetherington, "Advancing the Measurement of Authoritarianism," *Political Behavior* 45, (2023): 537–560.

73 Matthew C. MacWilliams, "Who Decides When the Party Doesn't? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 4 (October 2016): 716–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516001463>.

74 Ibid.

One of the biggest difficulties in the study of authoritarianism has been disentangling RWA from conservative political ideologies, yet the most recent literature suggests that authoritarianism can manifest on both the right and the left. On the left, left-wing authoritarianism is characterized by dogmatism, punitive attitudes toward dissenters, and desire for strong authority figures, but manifested on behalf of left-wing values.⁷⁵

John A. Powell and Eloy Toppin Jr. challenge Stenner's and others' theories on the basis that most analyses of authoritarianism fail to incorporate a contextualized theory of intergroup dynamics.⁷⁶ In their view, it is necessary to include an analysis of the impact of dominance as a legitimizing characteristic of in-group formation and identity construction based on dominant in-group membership. Based on Powell's and Toppin's analysis, in much of the West the dominant in-group formation takes shape around the ideology and social force of whiteness, which provides a bonding element that compels narrow identities and exclusive group membership. In other contexts, in-group formation could coalesce around a different ideology.⁷⁷ (See more resources by The Horizons Project [on race and democracy](#)).

Authoritarian Practices

Dutch scholar Marlies Glasius challenges existing, and mostly taxonomical, approaches to authoritarianism and instead promotes a focus on practices rather than regime or personality types, as, in her words, it allows us to “go beyond a single-state context and recognize such phenomena as translational illiberalism or public-private authoritarian partnership.”⁷⁸ Glasius describes authoritarian practices as “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice.”⁷⁹ She distinguishes authoritarian practices from illiberal practices, defined as organized infringements of individual autonomy and dignity, and remarks on the dimension of sabotage as simply lack of accountability would expand the concept of authoritarian practice too widely.

Based on this practice-oriented understanding of authoritarianism, authoritarian practices can be said to happen both in authoritarian and democratic states, and can occur at the national level but also at the subnational level or be carried out by nonstate actors (Glasius cites the digital surveillance programme of the US National Security Agency and Hungary's 2010 media law as examples).⁸⁰

In this vein, some scholars remind us that while current attention focuses on the authoritarian narratives and proposals of far-right actors, we should also pay attention to the “authoritarian transformations happening within liberal democratic regimes led by liberal (conservative or social democrat) governments, who increasingly rely on politics of control and discipline rather than consent-building, let alone material concessions to the dominated.”⁸¹

75 Manson, “Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Left-Wing Authoritarianism.”

76 John A. Powell and Eloy Toppin Jr., “Uprooting Authoritarianism: Deconstructing the Stories Behind Narrow Identities and Building a Society of Belonging,” *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 11, no. 1, (2021): 1–82.

77 Ibid.

78 Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is...and Is Not.”

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, *Global Authoritarianism*.

OVERVIEW

The Authoritarian Playbook

The nonprofit organization [Protect Democracy](#), in recognition that democratic erosion nowadays occurs in a piecemeal and gradual way, has developed a framework to understand the interrelated tactics that constitute the authoritarian playbook.⁸²

Politicizing Independent Institutions	All democracies have functions that operate independently from partisan political actors, from law enforcement to central banking. Authoritarians attack and seek to capture those institutions.
Spreading Disinformation	Many politicians lie, but authoritarians propagate and amplify falsehoods deliberately and with abandon and ruthless efficiency.
Aggrandizing Executive Power	Authoritarian projects cannot succeed without the cooperation or acquiescence of legislatures, courts, and other institutions.
Quashing Dissent	Strong democracies have strong oppositions and an independent press. Authoritarians seek to silence those sources of dissent.
Scapegoating Vulnerable Communities	Many authoritarians attack vulnerable groups intentionally, sowing division and attempting to turn the many against the few.
Corrupting Elections	Twenty-first century authoritarians generally maintain the facade of elections while tilting the rules against their opponents, suppressing votes, and biasing or even overturning the results.
Stoking Violence	Most autocrats deliberately look the other way from political violence. Many actively inflame violence to stoke fear, division, and feelings of insecurity

Fascism

There's a plethora of debates in the field of fascism studies as to what constitutes fascism, most often considered as an extreme and ultranationalist ideology, movement, or political system (in addition, a variety of disciplines have approached the study of fascism). Despite nearly a century of scholarship, two schools of thought persist with seemingly irreconcilable understandings, the "ideal-type model of generic fascism" and the "Marxist theories of fascism."

Some scholars argue that fascism should be used narrowly and applied only to the regime of Benito Mussolini's Italy (sometimes expanding it to include Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany and less often to Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain). Beyond this narrowest conception, the features that characterize fascism are also debated, and while it is often used to describe a regime type or an ideology, others, such as Linz, describe fascism as "a type of political movement, ideology and style, of which Nazism was a distinct (and even somewhat aberrant) variant" and fundamentally illiberal.⁸³

Within Marxist schools of thought, on the contrary, there's an insistence that fascism should be understood as a social action resulting from social struggles rather than an ideology or abstract idea, perceiving fascism as a reactionary movement that can be explained through capitalist contradictions. Yet this understanding deprioritizes ideological components that are key to fascism, such as the role of racism.⁸⁴

Within the academic literature, however, there is broad agreement that not all illiberal regimes can be classified as fascist, and that labeling any challenge to liberalism or democracy as fascist obscures, rather than clarifies, both the term and the political phenomenon under analysis.⁸⁵

Some scholars look at fascism as an extreme, totalitarian case that takes over all aspects of social, private, and public life. In this sense, in the 1990s, scholars of the "ideal-type model" arrived at a more consensual definition of fascism as a revolutionary form of ultranationalism that has a generic fascist ideological minimum or "mythic core." This mythic core is "the fanatical belief in the urgent need to rally the transclass populist forces of the nation or race (catalyzed by an elite, a vanguard or charismatic leader) to regenerate the organically conceived nation or race so that it can be saved from a state of existential threat and decadence in which it finds itself. Only then can it enter, imminently or eventually, a heroic phase of demographic health, cultural creativity, military strength, civilizational greatness and faith in the immortality of the nation/race."⁸⁶

Roger Griffin provides a minimalist definition of fascism as an ideological construct of a utopian ultranationalist state.⁸⁷ Griffin and Constantin Iordachi remark on two implications of this notion:

first, fascism's need, given its 'will' to realize the utopia of a total 'new order,' to complete the transition from an ideology promoted by a small nucleus of fanatic-

82 Jennifer Dresden, Aaron Baird, and Ben Raderstorff, "The Authoritarian Playbook," *Protect Democracy*, June 15, 2022, <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/the-authoritarian-playbook>.

83 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

84 Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

85 Udi Greenberg, "Intellectual History and the Fascism Debate: An Analogies and Polemic," *Modern Intellectual History* 20, no. 2 (June 2023): 571–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244322000129>.

86 Roger Griffin and Constantin Iordachi, "Fascism," in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Sociology*, ed. by William Outhwaite and Stephen Turner (London, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2018), 548–571.

87 Roger Griffin, *International Fascism: Theories, Causes, and the New Consensus* (London: Arnold, 1998).

“ Yet those pursuing authoritarian populist politics operate and contest elections in locales where elections cannot be considered simply facade; for many citizens, the relationship with these leaders is entered into voluntarily. ”

ics to a cadre organization, and from there to a trans-class, trans-gender and trans-generational populist movement, one with the potential to grow into a truly mass movement capable of serving as a spring-board for the assault on state power; second, fascism's inbuilt aspiration to create a uniquely nationalist form of totalitarianism dedicated to the creation of a populist or international racial community purged of decadence, and drawing deeply on the forces of tradition in order to achieve yet unimagined greatness projected centuries into the future.⁸⁸

88 Griffin, *International Fascism*.

89 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 219.

90 Paxton cites the following as the key mobilizing passions of fascism: a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of traditional solutions, primacy of the group, and belief that one's group is a victim, which justifies any action against internal and external enemies, need for closer integration of a purer community, need for authority by natural chiefs (male), superiority of the leader's instincts over abstract and universal reason, beauty of violence, and the right of the chosen people to dominate others. *Ibid*, 220.

91 Shane Burley, *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (Chicago: AK Press, 2017).

It follows that supremacy, militarism, and foreign aggression are central principles of fascism.

In terms of the defining characteristics of fascism, scholars mention the following: a regime in which the ultimate power rests in the leader, who is the embodiment of the nation and the state; the state conceived not just as a legal institution but an ethical, organic, and spiritual entity, which requires full loyalty and submission; the pursuit of an economic doctrine of corporatism, extending government control over the economy, nationalizing key industries, and making massive state investments; investment in visual propaganda, aesthetics, and theatrical staging (developing a powerful visuality); belief in hierarchy between groups and essentialized identity; and outright rejection democracy.

Prominent and oft-cited fascism scholar Robert Paxton, nonetheless, challenges theorizations of fascism as an ideology and instead defines it as:

[a] form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.⁸⁹

In Paxton's view, fascism has certain beliefs, such as leadership adoration and supremacy of a master race, but generally lacks categorical and dogmatic pronouncements.⁹⁰

Shane Burley, a writer, filmmaker, and antifascist author of the book *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It*, centers the hierarchical aspect in his understanding of fascism, defining it as relying on two pillars: a belief in human inequality and in essentialized identities that are eternal and transcendent. These two beliefs create social stratification and allow for this notion of fascism to extend beyond regimes of the twentieth century and apply to a wider set of actors and phenomena.⁹¹

Totalitarianism

While totalitarianism and authoritarianism are not one and the same, they certainly have a relationship of kinship, as do totalitarianism and fascism.

According to the renowned historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt, the key defining characteristics of totalitarianism are a totalizing ideology and terror. Arendt argues the essence of totalitarian rule is not that it curtails or eliminates certain freedoms, nor that it eradicates the love of freedom from human hearts; but that

it locks people in an iron band of total terror that leaves no space for private life and that the self-coercion of the totalitarian logic destroys people's capacity for experience and thought just as their capacity for action.⁹²

While Arendt emphasized terror, Linz focused instead on a regime form for completely organizing political life and society (whereas fascists seek control of political life, they leave some room for personal and economic life).⁹³ According to Linz, totalitarianism includes an exclusive, autonomous, and more or less intellectually elaborate ideology with which the ruling group or leader, and the party serving the leaders, identify and which they use as a basis for policies or manipulate to legitimize them. The ideology thus provides some ultimate meaning, sense of historical purpose, and interpretation of social reality. Within totalitarian regimes, citizen participation in and active mobilization for political and collective social tasks are encouraged, demanded, rewarded, and channeled through a single party and many monopolistic secondary groups. Passive obedience and apathy, and retreat into the role of “parochials” and “subjects,” characteristic of many authoritarian regimes, are considered undesirable by the rulers.

The political science perspective is perhaps most useful in helping us understand the policies, mode of governance, and rhetoric of authoritarian leaders and their allies, while the social psychology approach is more helpful in comprehending the “demand” side of authoritarianism, why people support authoritarians, and the psychology of authoritarian leaders.

Current authoritarian populist leaders pursue authoritarian practices—although authoritarian practices are not solely the remit of actors whose main political goal is to pursue a nativist and exclusionary society. Yet those pursuing authoritarian populist politics operate and contest elections in locales where elections cannot be considered simply facade; for many citizens, the relationship with these leaders is entered into voluntarily; and beyond electoral considerations, authoritarian populist leaders often seek mass political mobilization and majoritarian public support for their nativist and exclusionary agenda.

Liberal Democracy and Illiberalism

The field of democratic theory is one rife with conceptual contestation. Definitions of democracy abound, and democracy is often coupled with other epithets that modulate its meaning, be it liberal democracy, radical democracy, and so on. Narrow definitions of democracy conceive it as a system of government embedded in the principle of national sovereignty, where the power is vested in the hands of the people, directly or through elected representatives.⁹⁴ This procedural view makes no reference to collective or minority rights, which some scholars (see below) argue stem from liberalism and not democracy per se.

When “democracy” is coupled with the term “liberal,” it oftentimes brings about confusion, as liberalism can refer either to a conception of political liberty or to a

92 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2017).

93 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

94 See footnote 48.

“ According to Arendt, the essence of totalitarian rule is that it locks people in an iron band of total terror that leaves no space for private life and that the self-coercion of the totalitarian logic destroys people’s capacity for experience and thought just as their capacity for action. ”

Authoritarianism at a Glance

<p>In political science</p>	<p>Political system (regime type) characterized by ill-defined and concentrated executive power (at the expense of the judicial and legislative branches), limited political pluralism, and minimal political mobilization.</p> <p>Generally, authoritarians do not organize periodic, free, and fair elections, although elections may take place as a façade. Power is often imposed by authority through coercion.</p> <p>Authoritarian regimes may take different forms: military, single party, personalist, or a combination.</p> <p>Authoritarians adopt practices that do away with political accountability, suppress dissent, seize control of democratic institutions, and curtail fundamental political rights.</p>
<p>In social psychology</p>	<p>A psychological profile of people characterized by a desire for order and hierarchy and a fear of outsiders.</p> <p>Authoritarian personality theory can tell us about likely correlations between holding what scholars call authoritarian values and voting behavior. But it does not aim to investigate what the leaders elected by these “authoritarian” voters do once in office.</p>
<p>As authoritarian practices</p>	<p>Patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation, and disabling voice.</p>
<p>Fascism</p>	<p>An extreme and ultranationalist ideology, movement, or regime, which has an ideological “mythic core,” understood as a fanatical belief in the need to regenerate the nation or race. Supremacy, militarism, and foreign aggressions are central principles of fascism.</p>
<p>Totalitarianism</p>	<p>System with the most comprehensive and dogmatic ideology, rooted in terror.</p>
<p>Authoritarianism, fascism, and totalitarianism</p>	<p>Authoritarians usually prefer a passive demobilized citizenry, while fascists and totalitarians promote citizens’ active involvement for political and collective social tasks through a single party and its institutions.</p> <p>Authoritarians generally want a strong but limited state and hesitate to intervene in the economy or in social welfare programs, as fascists do.⁹⁵</p> <p>Fascists seek to exert total control over political life yet may allow some leeway in personal and economic domains, whereas totalitarians seek full control of personal, political, social, and economic life.</p>

doctrine about economic policy. Contemporary theory of liberal democracy adds to the procedural understanding of democracy by defining a form of government that combines liberal thought with the mechanisms of representative democracy. Francis Fukuyama detaches democracy from liberalism. He defines democracy as rule by the people, today institutionalized in periodic free and fair elections. In contrast, he conceives liberalism as the rule of law, a system of formal rules that restrict the powers of the executive, even if that executive is democratically legitimated through an election.⁹⁶

According to Mark F. Plattner:

“*democracy* is an answer to the question of who rules. It requires that the people be sovereign. If they do not rule directly, as they did in the ancient Greek polis, they must at least be able to choose their representatives in free and fair elections. *Liberalism*, by contrast, prescribes not how rulers are chosen but what the limits to their power are once they are in office. These limits, which are ultimately designed to protect the rights of the individual, demand the rule of law and are usually set forth in a written constitution (hence ‘constitutional democracy’ sometimes serves as an alternative term for ‘liberal democracy’).”⁹⁷

A liberal democracy is thus said to protect individual rights and minority rights, respect the rule of law and the separation of powers, and hold regular elections.

The concept of “illiberal democracy” is said to have been popularized in a 1997 *Foreign Affairs* piece coined by journalist Fareed Zakaria.⁹⁸ In Zakaria’s understanding, an illiberal democracy is a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy (relatively free and fair elections that reflect a reality of popular participation in politics) with illiberalism (insofar as civil liberties are not protected and there is a lack of respect for the rule of law, minority rights, and institutional checks and balances).⁹⁹

More recently, Marlene Laruelle has argued for the adoption of illiberalism as its own ideology dissociated from the literature on regime types and as being in permanent situational relation to liberalism.¹⁰⁰ In her view, the following approach is more productive to understand illiberalism:

1. Illiberalism is a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context-based, is to some degree coherent.
2. It represents a backlash against today’s liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support.
3. It proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric, or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. It proposes to restore national sovereignty in various spheres: internationally, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favor of the sovereign nation-state; economically, by denouncing neoliberal orthodoxy and promoting protectionism at the nation-state level (while at the same time, when in power, sometimes implementing neoliberal reforms); and culturally, by rejecting multiculturalism

95 Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 217.

96 Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022), 2.

97 Marc F. Plattner, “Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (January 2019): 5–19, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/illiberal-democracy-and-the-struggle-on-the-right/>.

98 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (December 1997): 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

99 *Ibid.*

100 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 303–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

and minority rights in favor of majoritarianism. This majoritarianism advances a “traditional” vision of gender relations (what is defined as “traditional” covering a vast range of practices depending on the local context) and a vision of the nation that—whether essentialist and nativist or assimilationist—takes from nationalism the division between.

4. It calls for a shift from politics to culture and is post-postmodern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalization.

Illiberalism, as an ideology on its own would, would thus be compatible with certain proceduralist conceptions of democracy and not solely with authoritarian regimes. This is, in fact, what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been advocating for the past ten years.¹⁰¹

Democratic Recession, Erosion, Backsliding?

Nancy Bermeo defines democratic backsliding—in its broadest sense—as the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining democracy (a turning away from its ideal),¹⁰² while Natasha Wunsch and Philippe Blanchard characterize democratic backsliding as a process of gradual dismantling of domestic checks and balances generally carried out by an increasingly dominant executive.¹⁰³ As such, the term embraces multiple processes, given that the political institutions that sustain democracy are multiple. Given the breadth of the concept, Bermeo presents six major varieties of democratic backsliding:¹⁰⁴ classic open-ended coups d'état, executive coups (or self-coups/*autogolpes*), promissory coups,¹⁰⁵ election-day vote fraud, executive aggrandizement, and manipulating elections strategically.

Haemin Jee, Hans Lueders, and Rachel Myrick's definition of democratic backsliding focuses instead on freedoms. In their view, democratic backsliding is any change of a political community's formal or informal rules that reduces that community's ability to guarantee the freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny, or equality in freedom.¹⁰⁶

Wunsch and Blanchard categorize democratic safeguards in three categories, each of which could be weakened or undermined through democratic backsliding.¹⁰⁷ Vertical safeguards relate to the formal electoral process and electoral turnout, diagonal safeguards comprise freedom of expression and association and free media, and horizontal safeguards encompass an independent parliament and judiciary.¹⁰⁸

Michael Coppedge argues that there are two distinct pathways to democratic erosion: one is characterized by attacks against civil liberties and the free media, “a classic path of growing repression of speech, media, assembly, and civil liberties, combined with deteriorating political discourse.” The other pathway “involves the concentration of power in the executive at the expense of the courts and the legislature, similar to what Guillermo O'Donnell called ‘delegative democracy,’ which entails the erosion of horizontal accountability.”¹⁰⁹

In an empirical study of the state of democracies, scholar Larry Diamond uses the

101 Attila Juhász, “Announcing the ‘illiberal state,’” Heinrich Böhl Stiftung, August 2, 2014, <https://www.boell.de/en/2014/08/21/announcing-illiberal-state> and “What Is Going on in Illiberal Hungary?” Amnesty International, May 31, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/what-is-going-on-in-illiberal-democracy-hungary>.

102 Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

103 Natasha Wunsch and Philippe Blanchard, “Patterns of Democratic Backsliding in Third-Wave Democracies: A Sequence Analysis Perspective,” *Democratization* 30, no. 2 (February 17, 2023): 278–301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130260>.

104 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

105 Bermeo describes promissory coups as “fram[ing] the ouster of an elected government as a defense of democratic legality and mak[ing] a public promise to hold elections and restore democracy as soon as possible” and executive aggrandizement as taking “place without executive replacement and at a slower pace. This more common form of backsliding occurs when elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences.”

106 Haemin Jee, Hans Lueders, and Rachel Myrick, “Towards a Unified Approach to Research on Democratic Backsliding,” *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (May 19, 2022): 754–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2010709>.

107 Wunsch and Blanchard, “Patterns of Democratic Backsliding in Third-Wave Democracies.”

108 *Ibid.*

109 Michael Coppedge, “Eroding Regimes: What, Where, and When?” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3066677>.

concept of democratic erosion, noting that democratic breakdown most often occurs by the abuse of power and desecration of democratic institutions and practices by democratically elected rulers.¹¹⁰

Challenging the Idea of “Backlash”

Prominent Belgian sociologist and gender studies scholar David Paternotte, in discussing the oft-used term “gender backlash,” contests the usefulness of the term backlash that characterizes antigender campaigns as an attempt to either maintain status quo or turn the clock backward.¹¹¹ Paternotte believes the term fails to capture that assaults on women’s or LGBTI rights take part in a wider project, which strives to establish a new political order.¹¹²

In a similar vein, Judith Butler also questions the appropriateness of the word “backlash.” They suggest that “there is another term that may be better—a ‘restoration project,’ a right-wing effort to return to patriarchal authority, to patriarchal families.”¹¹³

Authors such as Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg prefer to use “autocratization” rather than “democratic backsliding” or “breakdown,” as a matter of degree, since autocratization can occur both in democracies and autocracies. They challenge backsliding on the basis that it suggests that democracies slide back, rather than perhaps developing in a new direction (be it an autocracy or, for example, a competitive autocratic system).¹¹⁴ The concept of democratic breakdown, alternatively, captures the moment when a state ceases to be a democracy and is unambiguously authoritarian. Autocratic consolidation designates the gradual decline of democratic traits in already authoritarian situations.¹¹⁵

However, there is definitely a backlash dynamic that succeeds efforts to advance equity, inclusion, and belonging. As Powell and Menéndez explain, efforts to promote inclusion and equity easily trigger status anxiety and become status threats when framed through a narrative of dispossession or loss.¹¹⁶ The sense of loss of status, respect, and esteem trigger the mechanism of backlash as “a natural and predictable by-product of attacking traditional or established hierarchies.”¹¹⁷

It follows that backlash does capture at least part of the dynamic that explains the resonance of authoritarian populist leaders, albeit the backlash dynamic should perhaps be situated within a wider project to create something that restores part of the past and builds a new political order.

110 Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>.

111 David Paternotte, “Viktor Frankenstein and Its Creature: the Many Lives of ‘Gender Ideology,’” *International Review of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2023): 80–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>.

112 Ibid.

113 Judith Butler, *Who Is Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024).

114 Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes,” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 1 (March 19, 2018): 60–77, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>.

115 Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg, “Regimes of the World.”

116 Powell and Menéndez, *Belonging without Othering*, 116.

117 Ibid., 117.

Authoritarian Populism

The intellectual background to the concept of authoritarian populism can be found in the writings of sociologist and Marxist cultural theorist Stuart Hall. In a 1979 essay, Hall, to describe the origins and tactics of the then-nascent new right in Britain (or Thatcherism), conceptualized authoritarian populism as authoritarianism crafted for a modern democratic and capitalist context.¹¹⁸ Hall's theoretical framework is a model that couples authoritarian positions with the pursuit and attainment of popular legitimacy. In his words, authoritarian populism is "an exceptional form of the capitalist state, which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place, and which at the same time has been able to construct around itself an active popular consent."¹¹⁹

Hall theorized that authoritarian populism, as a complex historical phenomenon, is marked by leaders who cultivate and amplify exaggerated moral panics in response to social issues to generate popular support for an authoritarian regime. In the 1970s, he examined this dynamic in the context of mugging and the exaggerated public reaction to it, particularly when compared to the actual statistics on the prevalence of the issue.¹²⁰ In Hall's understanding, moral panics were instrumentalized to persuade the public that migrants and racialized citizens were to blame for existing problems rather than a consequence of the capitalist system.¹²¹

Since, the term "authoritarian populism" has been used by various scholars and analysts, evolving from the context specific and historical understanding that Hall advanced and nowadays rarely applied to a political phenomenon like Thatcherism. Building on Hall's work, Scoones et al. define authoritarian populism (within the field of rural studies) as a subset of populism which:

typically depicts politics as a struggle between "the people" and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged "Others," at home or abroad or both. It justifies interventions in the name of "taking back control" in favour of "the people," returning the nation to "greatness" or "health" after real or imagined degeneration attributed to those Others. Conflating a diverse and democratic people with images of dangerous and threatening crowds—"a brutal and ignorant mass" (Rancière 2013)—allows for the putting of one ideology and position "first," while excluding others and generating tensions across society. Authoritarian populism frequently circumvents, eviscerates or captures democratic institutions, even as it uses them to legitimate its dominance, centralise power and crush or severely limit dissent. Charismatic leaders, personality cults and nepotistic, familial or kleptocratic rule combined with impunity are common, though not essential, features of authoritarian populism.¹²²

118 Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show."

119 Ibid.

120 Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis, Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: MacMillan, 1979).

121 Ibid.

122 Ian Scoones et al., "Emancipatory Rural Politics: Confronting Authoritarian Populism," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1339693>.

Along similar lines, Bugarcic conceives of authoritarian populism as one of many forms that populism can take. According to Bugarcic, authoritarian populists are nativists who attack the policies and foundations of the liberal international order and its core constitutional form—liberal constitutional democracy.¹²³ In his view, a democratic and antiestablishment populism, which combines elements of liberal and democratic convictions, is also possible.¹²⁴ Yet others, such as the scholars at the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, conceive authoritarian populism as authoritarianism under a different guise, rather than simply a subtype of populism.¹²⁵

In recent years, authoritarian populism as a concept has gained momentum, notably applied by Norris and Inglehart in their book *Cultural Backlash*.¹²⁶ In their understanding, authoritarian populism:

favors policies where the state actively intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, typically by limiting same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, access to contraception and abortion, and affirmative action or quotas—unless, in some cases, these types of liberal policies are framed as a defense of national cultures against attacks by “others.” Finally, in the public sphere, since liberal democracy has been delegitimized, authoritarian populists favor strong governance, preserving order and security against perceived threat [...] even at the expense of democratic norms protecting judicial independence, freedom of the media, human rights and civil liberties, the oversight role of representative assemblies, and standards of electoral integrity.

Other scholars prefer different terms to describe these modern nativist and exclusionary movements that display a populist component. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin prefer to speak of “national populism,” an ideology that prioritizes the culture and interests of the nation and promises to give voice to a people who feel that they have been neglected, even in contempt, by distant and often corrupt elites.¹²⁷ Miller-Idriss instead speaks of nationalist populism,¹²⁸ following authors such as Francis Fukuyama, who describe it as a political form that undermines the institutions of democracy from within and which thus lets the most powerful actors in society use the state to meet their own interests to the detriment of a demos who feels alienated from those institutions that historically had guaranteed its sovereignty (Fukuyama also uses the expression “populist nationalism”).¹²⁹

The term “ethnopolitism” is also used by some scholars to refer to an elite strategy for winning votes and concentrating power that is empowered and justified by a companion playbook of ethnic and majoritarian appeals.¹³⁰ According to Milada Anna Vachudova, ethnopolitism is flexible with the truth, and flexible in identifying friends and enemies of “the people.” Ethnopolitist parties manipulate opposition to neoliberal economic policies and racialize the immigrant threat.¹³¹

Far Right

The expression “far right” serves as an umbrella descriptor for a wide range of exclusionary ideologies and a diverse array of actors. Notable populism scholar Cas Mudde succinctly defines the far right as those on the right who are “antisystem”

123 Bugarcic, “The Two Faces of Populism.”

124 Ibid.

125 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, *Global Authoritarianism*.

126 Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.

127 Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018).

128 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

129 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

130 Milada Anna Vachudova, “Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 318–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787163>.

131 Anna Vachudova, “Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe.”

and antagonistic toward liberal democracy.¹³² Building on this idea, Miller-Idriss has identified four interrelated areas that characterize far-right actors: antigovernment and antidemocratic practices and ideals; exclusionary beliefs; the perception of existential threats and conspiracies; and apocalyptic fantasies.¹³³

According to Miller-Idriss, “far-right ideas run fundamentally counter to the norms, values, and beliefs that underpin democratic practice across the globe, threatening hallmarks like free and fair elections; systems of checks and balances; the protection of individual freedom; the rule of law; and freedoms of the press, religion, speech, and assembly.”¹³⁴ Far right ideologies are also hierarchical (they establish lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, gender, etc.), and at their extreme they dehumanize groups of people in ways that justify violence (Miller-Idriss also notes that white supremacy has been the primary form of exclusionary ideology in the United States, although not the only one).¹³⁵

In that sense, the far right embeds its exclusionary and dehumanizing ideologies within a framework of existential threats to the dominant group, conspiracies that fit into racial or ethnic supremacist beliefs and that incite anger, resentment, and hate, “coupled with fear of existential danger and a sense of betrayal and backlash against those elites who are deemed responsible.”¹³⁶ According to Miller-Idriss, “on the extreme fringe, the far right believes that the only way to prevent this process is through an apocalyptic race war, which will result in the rebirth of a new world order and a restored white civilization.”¹³⁷

In essence, the core ideological features of the far right are said to be ethnopluralism, nativism, and the pursuit of an ethnocracy.¹³⁸ Ethnopluralism is an idea developed mainly by French radical right activists (known as the *nouvelle droite*), which argues that people are and should be divided into separate ethnic groups which, while equal, should remain segregated. Nativism, on its own, is a combination of nationalism (the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group) and xenophobia (hate for “nonnative elements,” whether people or ideas), which portrays the other as threatening to the homogeneous nation-state (in European nativism, Islamophobia and antisemitism play a significant constitutive role).¹³⁹ An ethnocracy, on its part, is a democracy in which citizenship is based on ethnicity or race, where the dominance of one ethnic group is structurally established.

The far right is often divided in two key categories. While actors in each category oppose liberal democratic consensus, they do so in different ways.¹⁴⁰ The extreme right rejects the essence of democracy (popular sovereignty and majority rule) and condones violence, whereas the radical right accepts the essence of democracy and works within the system, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and the separation of powers.

132 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

133 Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*.

134 Miller-Idriss, “The Global Dimensions of Populist Nationalism.”

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Mudde, *The Far Right Today*.

“ Nativist, exclusionary, and ultimately illiberal movements and the strategies and policies that they adopt are rapidly evolving and adapting to diverse local and historical realities as well as to global events. ”

Far Right or Authoritarian Populism?

Oftentimes, the terms “far right” and “authoritarian populism” are used indistinctively to describe the same leaders and movements. Conceptually, there is significant overlap between both, as the traits that are most often advanced as characterizing the far right are often also present in those who practice authoritarian populist politics. In many cases, actors will fit both the far right and authoritarian populist definitions.

Yet the use of “right” can obscure or confuse the specific agenda of these actors, who tend to position themselves more as antisystem than on the left- or right-wing spectrum.

Authoritarian populist movements described as far right are exclusionary and often espouse a white supremacist or European/Western chauvinist ideology which calls for domination (often under the rubric of “law and order”). However, some propose economic policies that do not align with free-market orthodoxy (and in some instances, their gender politics defy conservative dogma, such as in the Netherlands).¹⁴¹ This is particularly the case when it comes to authoritarian populists in Eastern Europe, some in Southern Europe, and some Global South countries.

Newer movements in Europe, such as the new German party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, a splinter of the far-left Die Linke, may also in the future pose a challenge to the use of the expression far right to describe nativist and anti-immigrant movements. The BSW, while technically situated on the far left, strongly positions itself as anti-immigrant, showcases nativist inclinations, and practices a mode of politics that would a priori fit the authoritarian populist mold, as described later.¹⁴²

* Differences between Authoritarianism and Authoritarian Populism:

Authoritarian populist movements usually defend the principles of popular sovereignty and majoritarianism, understood as the supremacy of the will of the people at the expense of minorities, which they exclude from their definition of “the people.” As such, authoritarian populists continue to hold relatively free and fair elections, while authoritarians entrench their rule without elections or with fraudulent noncompetitive ones.

Authoritarian populists divide society into two homogeneous groups, the “true” people and the elite, and are strongly antisystem, while authoritarian leaders often do not feature an antielite component and are pro-status quo rather than antiestablishment. Thus, it cannot be said that the latter are always populists or employ populist tactics. For example, Russia’s Vladimir Putin could be labeled as authoritarian, but in Putin’s Russia, the state and not the people are the central political subject,¹⁴³ and in contrast to most populists, Putin rarely seeks to connect with the public or takes part in debates nor does he challenge elites¹⁴⁴ (even if authoritarian populists may do so mostly rhetorically and not focus on the economically wealthy). In that sense, authoritarian rulers need the cooperation from various sectors of society, be it economic elites or the military. In authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, coercion is usually an important factor to maintain stability.

141 Daphne Halikiopoulou and Tim Vlandas, “Understanding Right-Wing Populism and What to Do about It,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2022), <https://libraryfes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/19110-20220517.pdf>.

142 Thomeczek, “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian—and Populist?” and James Angelos, “Is Germany’s rising superstar so far left she’s far right?” *Politico*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-superstar-sahra-wagenknecht-far-left-far-right/>

143 Luke March, “Putin: Populist, Anti-populist, or Pseudo-populist?1,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (September 5, 2023): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2250744>.

144 Torrey Taussig and Yulia Netesova, “Putin’s No Populist, but He Can Gain from Populist Movements Worldwide,” *Brookings*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putins-no-populist-but-he-can-gain-from-populist-movements-worldwide/>.

Once in office, it is possible that authoritarian populists start a process of dismantling institutions designed to check powers and maintain accountability and install an authoritarian regime.

- * **On Alt-Right:** Those within nativist, exclusionary, and populist movements have opted for this moniker to self-designate. However, the expression “alt-right” could be seen as sanitizing an extreme movement. In consequence, we would advise to opt for alternative nomenclature instead.
- * **Why a Preference for “Authoritarian Populism” and Not “Far Right”?** Both terms can often be used—correctly—as synonyms. However, “right” doesn’t appropriately capture the redistributive nature of some of the economic policies proposed by authoritarian populists, who do not cleanly fit into the mold of traditional free-market conservative economic orthodoxy, nor does it always reflect their gender politics.

Authoritarian Populism as a Framework

Some authors view authoritarian populism as a type of populism; others as a type of authoritarianism. Many writers also use the term without fully defining the concept. Yet despite discrepancies or lack of clarity, most agree that authoritarian populism mostly refers to a political phenomenon that distinctively combines authoritarian values with populism (whether populism is viewed as an ideology, strategy, or a rhetorical style).

Nativist, exclusionary, and ultimately illiberal movements and the strategies and policies that they adopt are rapidly evolving and adapting to diverse local and historical realities as well as to global events. Given our complex world, not a single concept nor framework will ever be able to capture all the nuances and complexities of lived reality. There are myriad concepts and frameworks that can be applied to understand the modern nativist, exclusionary, and populist politics embodied by leaders such as Donald Trump, Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, or Jair Bolsonaro.

Our approach is to think of authoritarian populism as a form of politics, or political approach (rather than as a type of populism or authoritarianism, or an ideology or regime type) that pulls and combines aspects from both authoritarian and populist playbooks and deploys them for nativist and exclusionary purposes. In that sense, it is a form of politics that informs the strategic and tactical decisions of these actors both at the narrative and policy level. Authoritarian populism as a framework can help as a diagnostic tool but also as a blueprint to make sense of those choices and what can be done about them.

Across the world, in places such as Hungary, Italy, India, Sweden, Slovakia, or Brazil, we see how these movements attempt to aggrandize executive power, seek to control the judiciary, or try to control the media, which are classic authoritarian moves. But they are doing so while also pursuing populist strategies that criticize elites in ways that are resonant with the realities—or at least elements of it—of many citizens that feel the current system is not working for them. These movements do so,

“ Efforts to promote inclusion and equity easily trigger status anxiety and become status threats when framed through a narrative of dispossession or loss. ”

nominally, in the name of democracy and transparency, while using dehumanizing rhetoric that scapegoats othered communities, fuels fears, and promotes a sense of existential threat that is then used to justify antidemocratic practices.

In practice, authoritarian populists are constantly straddling populist and authoritarian strategies to achieve and maintain power, to rally popular support in systems that still allow for political competition. In addition, they are often borrowing from social movements and traditionally left-wing paradigms, reinterpreting the lessons from Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci on cultural hegemony and the role of cultural institutions in shaping politics, mobilizing in university campuses, or promoting the use of state power to advance their political project.¹⁴⁵

Understanding authoritarian populism as a framework eschews the need to establish whether it's a subtype of populism or of authoritarianism, and it does not compete with taxonomical efforts to categorize regime types. Rather, it imbibes from the literature reviewed above.

Using populism on its own falls short to capture the substance of the authoritarian populist political project. Authoritarianism locates us primarily in the field of regime types and directs our attention to coercion and suppression. While some authoritarian populists certainly employ or instigate different forms of violence, coercion is not their primary tool to access and maintain power nor is it applied to attain and maintain the support of many of their supporters. Authoritarian populists tend to emphasize elections as the primary means of gaining and maintaining power, in contrast to methods such as coups d'état, even if they may manipulate the electoral process to gain unfair advantages.

The framework of authoritarian populism reflects a reality of popular participation in politics and an approach to a form of majoritarianism that seeks to mobilize without coercion a significant part of the electorate while it disregards the rights of those with less structural power. This framework also allows us to identify policies as authoritarian, following Glasius's approach to authoritarian practices, even if a country cannot be classified as such or has become a hybrid regime.

Authoritarian populism as a form of politics takes different forms in each context. Nonetheless, we observe significant patterns and similarities across borders, which is unsurprising given the now well-documented nature of transnational cooperation among an ecosystem of authoritarian populist actors.¹⁴⁶

In addition, it is remarkable that in terms of ideology most authoritarian populists have an ideological core composed of two pillars, nativism and anti-pluralism, but display significant ideological flexibility both over time and within movements themselves. This in a way allows for a widening of the range of possible policies that they may come to support at any given time. and for larger coalitions Instead of a coherent and consistent philosophical system maintained over time, adaptability, change, and performance characterize authoritarian populists.

Based on the literature review and ongoing analysis of modern politics, we have identified the following as the core components of authoritarian populist politics in the table "Authoritarian Populism as a Political Approach" on pages 29 and 30.

145 Miriam Juan-Torres González, "The Evolving Authoritarian Populist Playbook: Embracing 'Intersectional' Othering," *Democracy & Belonging Forum* at the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, June 3, 2024. Last accessed June 25, 2024, <https://www.democracyand-belongingforum.org/forum-blog/the-evolving-authoritarian-populist-playbook-embracing-intersectional-othering>.

146 See, for example, Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*; John Feffer, *Right Across the World* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Phillip M. Ayoub and Kristina Steockl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2024); Manuela Caiani, "Radical Right Cross-National Links and International Cooperation," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.013.20>; and Mary Fitzgerald and Claire Provost, "The American Dark Money behind Europe's Far Right," *Open Democracy* (July 2019), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/the-american-dark-money-behind-europes-far-right/>.

Authoritarian Populism as a Political Approach

<p>Key Strategies (implemented in pursuit of ideological pillars)</p>	<p>Construction of an exclusionary identity based on the interweaving of two</p> <p>Reality is filtered and interpreted through the lens of the competition between these groups</p>	<p>Elites versus the People: Deploy discursive strategy that presents reality as a competition between two homogeneous groups, the elite—out-of-touch, representative of the establishment, and corrupt—and the true people, who populists claim to represent. Those who disagree with the populist leader are generally considered outside of the in-group or traitors.</p> <p>Elites can include economic and political elites but also academics, scientists, and pundits more generally. No real challenge to the elites is necessary, as this strategy is mostly deployed discursively.</p>
		<p>Insiders versus Outsiders or Us vs Them (othering): the in-group is narrowly defined along a certain axis and portrayed as categorically good, while certain groups are vilified and essentialized, presented as homogeneous and uniformly evil.</p> <p>At the narrative level, this entails us-versus-them discursive frames. In policy, it results in legislation and regulation that perpetuates structural marginality and is specifically designed to benefit the in-group.</p>
	<p>Scapegoating</p>	<p>Political strategy that constructs a “them” often along racial or ethnic lines (but not exclusively), which is blamed for societal problems. The “Other” represents a threat to the good and real people of the nation and thus extreme measures against it are justified.</p> <p>Populism and Us vs Them intersect in scapegoating. Elites are blamed for the crises the authoritarian populist invokes and for selling out the country to a scapegoated group</p>
	<p>Stoking and exploiting fear: Existential threat</p>	<p>Authoritarian populists often fabricate or manipulate real crises, fueling moral panics to justify authoritarian measures. They exploit both genuine and manufactured fears—whether material or symbolic—and direct blame toward marginalized groups and elites.</p> <p>The nation, along with its purported core values and “true people,” is consistently framed as being under existential threat.</p>

Key Strategies (implemented in pursuit of ideological pillars)	Majoritarian appeals	<p>Authoritarian populist leaders seek to muster popular support or consent. Authoritarian populists contest elections, which can remain relatively free and fair. They are likely to have targeted strategies for different audiences: seek uncoerced support and mobilization of certain constituencies, pursue the consent or passivity of others, and silence or disenfranchise those they perceive as “Other” or enemies.</p> <p>Majoritarian appeals allow authoritarian populists to claim to pursue true democracy and transparency. At the policy level, this may result in support for direct democracy proposals that disregard key protections for minority groups.</p>
	Authoritarian practices within democratic systems	<p>Propose and often enact policies that help concentrate power without fully eradicating democratic institutions. Actions are often aimed at politicizing and controlling independent institutions, aggrandizing executive power, infringing upon the separation of power and eroding democratic freedoms such as freedom of speech and expression, and targeting of dissenters while allowing a certain degree of political pluralism.</p>
Ideological Pillars¹⁴⁷	Nativism	<p>Authoritarian populists underscore the preeminence of the interests of the “native-born” or “true inhabitants” of the nation (although “native” is not a stable category, authoritarian populists help delimit who the native-born are, often contributing to settler colonial constructs of the “native.”) The native tends to be defined along racial, ethnic, or religious lines.</p>
	Rejection of pluralism	<p>Pursuit of a homogeneous society and rejection of pluralism. This rejection can be explicit or implicit. Rejection can be absolute or mirror a belief in the subjugation of the other, which may be tolerated and even to a certain degree accepted, as long it conforms to specific majoritarian or “native” ideas.</p>

147 Authoritarian populists have a flexible ideology, where adaptability, lies, and performance play a specific role (on lies and performance, see Catherine Fieschi, *Populocracy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2019]). While in the social and moral realm, authoritarian populists tend to lean conservative, their gender politics are flexible and what Niels Spierings calls “trivotal,” as a “combination of trivial, meaning that it is not at the PRR’s [populist radical right’s] ideological core, and pivotal, meaning a core social relation that is instrumentalized to center and emphasize the PRR ideology.” Even within one movement, there may be actors that pursue an antigender campaign while others deploy femonationalism or homonationalism. See Niels Spierings, “Why Gender and Sexuality Are Both Trivial and Pivotal in Populist Radical Right Politics,” in *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, edited by Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), 41–58, <https://doi.org/10.1515/97838389449806-003>. Authoritarian populists also advance a diverse range of economic policies, often promoting the welfare state or public funding for families and in some instances nationalizing key industries. That is, their economic policy does not always conform to conservative orthodoxy. In that sense, nativism, existential threats, and rejection of pluralism are three structuring and overarching ideas through which all else is filtered.

As a framework informed by empirical observation of modern politics that shares conceptual features with other theories but serves practice-oriented efforts, we describe authoritarian populism as follows:

- * **Authoritarian populism** is a form of politics that combines features of populism and authoritarianism and is fueled by nativism (favoring “native” citizens over “outsiders”) and anti-pluralism (opposition to diversity). Authoritarian populist leaders cultivate and exploit fear of change and perceived ‘Others’ (often defined in racialized, ethnic, religious, or caste terms) to justify practices that limit political competition and accountability, all while claiming to defend a version of democracy that prioritizes majority rule over minority rights.
- * **Authoritarian populists** create a strong sense of in-group identity rooted in othering to shape how people perceive social and political issues. This identity, which helps delimit who is considered “native” and deserving, is reinforced by framing the world as a competition between two opposing, homogeneous groups:
 - + **‘The true people’** — whom the leader claims to represent—against a vaguely defined **‘elite’** associated with the establishment. [Populist dimension]
 - + **An exclusionary ‘us’** — depicted as uniformly good and in competition against a flattened and essentialized and bad **‘them’ or ‘Other,’** often defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or caste, and portrayed as a threat to the ‘us.’ [Authoritarian dimension]

Nurturing this strong sense of in-group identity and fear—in other words, belonging that is rooted in othering—helps shape how people perceive social and political issues. At a time when so much frustration is directed—understandably so—at public institutions, this mode of politics allows leaders to capitalize on and direct resentment towards support for exclusionary and authoritarian practices.

Many voters are drawn to authoritarian populists for their *populist* rhetoric—critiquing elites and a system that fails millions worldwide—rather than for their *authoritarianism*, which is often less visible. The exercise of authoritarian power is sometimes justified as necessary and even democratic, often under the guise of majoritarianism. However, by supporting nativist and anti-pluralist actors, voters clamoring for change (as recently seen in the 2024 elections in the United States, Austria, or the Netherlands, to name a few) inadvertently enable these leaders to reshape societies towards hybrid models that retain some democratic elements but deepen hierarchies and perpetuate violence.

This is not to suggest that existing institutions ought to be maintained as they are now as anti-establishment sentiment is widespread. While liberal democracies granted access and expanded rights and liberties for many, they also continue to rely on authoritarian practices to control marginalized groups and on the super exploitation of labor. Yet it is also possible to reimagine democracy as one rooted in [belonging without othering](#).¹⁴⁸ The appetite for change is evident. Unfortunately, authoritarian populists are currently the ones succeeding at advancing an alternative lens through which to view reality while telling citizens that their grievances are valid and seen.

148 For a comprehensive discussion of this vision, see *Belonging without Othering* by John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez.

Read more about the book at: <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/belonging-without-othering>.

Watch an extended conversation on the subject featuring Powell and Menéndez here: <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/belonging-without-othering-october28>