"Mechanisms of democratic erosion: Analysing populist rhetoric across international contexts"

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Abstract

This paper explores how populist rhetoric contributes to the erosion of democratic trust by analyzing the emotional and polarizing strategies employed by populist leaders in various international contexts. It aims to reveal the mechanisms through which such rhetoric undermines core democratic values and institutions. The research adopts a qualitative content analysis of political speeches delivered by prominent populist leaders from Hungary, the USA, India, Turkey, and France. Using NVivo software, thematic patterns were extracted and coded to identify rhetorical strategies. Supplementary computational analysis was conducted through Doc2Vec modeling to detect semantic patterns and quantify linguistic commonalities. The study finds that populist rhetoric consistently frames political discourse as a binary struggle between "the people" and "the elite," reinforced through emotional appeals, simplification of complex issues, and narratives of victimhood. These rhetorical tools foster public skepticism, weaken trust in democratic institutions such as the judiciary and media, and exacerbate social polarization. Populist rhetoric poses a significant challenge to democratic stability. By delegitimizing institutional authority and amplifying antagonistic narratives, populist leaders undermine the very foundations of democratic governance. The findings highlight the need for strengthening institutional transparency, civic education, and media literacy as tools to resist populist manipulation. Policymakers and democratic stakeholders must proactively counteract these narratives to protect democratic norms and foster social cohesion.

Keywords: Anti-elitism, Comparative analysis, Democratic erosion, Democratic stability, Emotional appeals, Institutional trust, Political communication, Political polarization, Populist rhetoric, Social vulnerability.

1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years, populist movements have become an integral part of the political landscape of many democratic countries. Populism, which was initially considered a phenomenon of marginal political forces, has now become a powerful tool for influencing voters, especially in the context of crises and socio-economic challenges [1]. Populist leaders actively use public discontent to mobilize the masses, presenting themselves as the only true representatives of "the people" and opposing themselves to the political elite, whom they blame for the decline and failure of state institutions. Their speeches are usually based on the idea that only they can return power to the people and restore justice in society [2].

Populist rhetoric has several characteristics that allow it to be extremely attractive to a wide range of citizens. One of the key features is the postulation of a deep confrontation between the "establishment" and the "people" [3]. In populist discourse, the elite is shown to be corrupt and indifferent to the interests of ordinary people. Populists create a clear dichotomy where "the people" stand as the source of true values and justice, while the elite are enemies who act solely in their own interests and suppress the real needs of citizens. In this context, populists position themselves as the only representatives of the people who can protect them from the evil intentions of elites [4]. Such a strategy allows populist leaders to form strong emotional support from those who feel disillusioned and dissatisfied with the existing system.

This emotional component plays an important role in populist rhetoric. The speeches of populists are full of emotions, they actively appeal to feelings of fear, anger, indignation, or hope. Emotions make it possible to quickly mobilize mass support because emotional perception often prevails over rational analysis. People involved in an emotional wave tend to act more decisively, supporting leaders who give them hope for a quick solution to problems or promise to fight those who are allegedly responsible for their troubles [5]. The emotionality of rhetoric becomes a powerful tool for strengthening the connection with the audience, causing it to feel that its interests are protected by a leader who understands and supports it. Before excessive emotionality, populist rhetoric is also defined by simplicity. In the face of socio-economic challenges, populists offer simple, intuitive explanations of problems and easy solutions. It is a maximalist black-and-white approach to complex social or political realities where there are only perpetrators and victims, without considering the full depth and multidimensionality of real problems [6].

Oversimplification allows populists to create clear messages that are quickly assimilated by the masses and thereby secure widespread support.

This style of rhetoric helps populist leaders increase support, especially among populations that feel socially or economically marginalized. However, despite these manifestations of democratic activism, populism often poses a threat to the very foundations of liberal democracy. One of the biggest challenges it poses to democratic institutions is that populists, once in power, rarely seek to share it or promote inclusive decision-making [7]. On the contrary, they tend to strengthen their personal power, limit independent institutions, and undermine the principles of the rule of law.

Populist rhetoric exploits existing divisions in society and deepens distrust of democratic institutions. It is based on the fact that democratic systems are not able to effectively represent the people, so these systems need either radical reform or even destruction to restore "true democracy". As a result, social polarization is increasing, further complicating the process of restoring trust in democratic institutions, as different population groups begin to perceive each other as enemies and political decisions as a struggle for power rather than a search for compromise.

Both in Europe and in North America, a populist reinterpretation of democratic discourse is taking place. The binary formulation of "corrupt elite" and "ordinary people", combined with emotionally charged rhetoric, caused disenchantment among the electorate and undermined confidence in democratic institutions. This erosion of trust in the democratic process is one of the fatal consequences of populist rhetoric.

Populism is considered a "subtle ideology", which means that it can join other ideological currents, both left and right, depending on the context [8]. The rhetorical strategy of opposing the people and the elite performs a series of psychological manipulations, such as a sense of belonging and involvement among supporters, and at the same time, condemning political opponents, using emotionally charged language that increases divisions in society [9].

The effectiveness of populist rhetoric lies in its ability to connect with the everyday experiences and grievances of ordinary people. Leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orban in Hungary have masterfully used populist language that evokes a sense of victimhood among their supporters. Trump's narrative includes claims that "elites" have rigged the system against "forgotten" American workers, creating an environment where individuals feel justified in their grievances and concerns. Similarly, Orbán presents Hungary's political landscape as a struggle against foreign influences and domestic elites, positioning himself as a defender of national identity and sovereignty [10].

By portraying the political elite as the enemy of the people, populist rhetoric creates an atmosphere of suspicion towards traditional democratic structures, including political parties, the media, and the judiciary [11]. Over time, this can undermine public confidence in these institutions, leading to a cycle of disenchantment and disengagement from the democratic process. Trust in democratic institutions is vital to their functioning and stability. However, the growth of populism is accompanied by a noticeable decrease in public trust in these institutions. When populist leaders frame their rhetoric as a direct confrontation with the "establishment," they encourage their supporters to see these institutions not as important components of democracy but as barriers to true representation. This transformation is evident in various countries where populist movements have gained support. The experience of America and China shows a significant increase in public skepticism towards the media and the judicial system, as they are presented as tools of the elite that are designed to suppress the voice of the people [12].

The consequences of this decline in trust are profound. As trust declines, citizens' willingness to participate in democratic processes, such as voting, participating in civic events, or supporting democratic norms, can be significantly reduced. The phenomenon of "democratic fatigue" becomes evident when citizens feel disillusioned with the political system and question

its ability to represent their interests [13]. This feeling can create a fertile environment for further populist rhetoric, leading to a vicious cycle that exacerbates initial problems with trust and engagement.

An aspect of populist rhetoric is rooted in the call for sacrifice, which plays a key role in mobilizing support and reinforcing the divide between "the people" and the "elite." By positioning supporters as victims of social injustices, populist leaders can energize their base and foster a sense of collective identity rooted in shared grievances. In the Finnish example, such rhetoric promotes support for the leader by relieving followers of the pressure to take responsibility for their circumstances [14]. This strategy is particularly effective in a neoliberal context where individuals are convinced that success is the result of personal achievement and effort. When populist leaders change the narrative to emphasize that their supporters are victims of external forces, such as globalization or corrupt elites, they alleviate some of the psychological pressure associated with personal failure. As a result, supporters may become more inclined to support leaders who offer them a narrative that absolves them of responsibility while scapegoating opposing elites.

This dual strategy of blame-shifting not only strengthens support for populist leaders but also fosters greater distrust of traditional democratic institutions. When people begin to see themselves as victims, they become more inclined to perceive institutions as complicit in their victimization, further undermining trust. The rhetoric of victimhood thus serves to reinforce populist narratives, creating a toxic environment for democratic engagement and cooperation.

Populist leaders often appeal to the "crisis of democracy", arguing that institutions do not work for the benefit of the people but only protect the interests of elites [15]. Such rhetoric leads to the fact that some citizens begin to consider democratic institutions ineffective or even corrupt, which undermines the legitimacy of democracy. In some cases, populists can cause lasting damage to democratic institutions if they gain significant political influence. For an example of populists using rhetoric that shifts the blame for economic and social ills to elites or external threats, one can look to leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines [16].

2. Materials and Methods

The current study employs a qualitative methodological framework centered around content analysis to investigate the rhetorical strategies populist leaders utilize to erode democratic institutions across diverse international contexts. Given the research aim of understanding the mechanisms of populist rhetoric, a thematic content analysis of political speeches and public statements was selected as the primary method. This approach allows for systematic identification and analysis of recurring rhetorical patterns, emotional appeals, and the dichotomization of "the people" versus "the elite," thereby providing insights into the ways populist leaders mobilize support and undermine trust in democratic processes.

A purposive sampling technique guided the selection of speeches to ensure representativeness in terms of political context, thematic diversity, and rhetorical richness. The corpus included significant political speeches delivered by prominent populist leaders, specifically Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Donald Trump (USA), Narendra Modi (India), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), and Marine Le Pen (France). Speeches chosen were from key political moments such as election rallies, state ceremonies, and periods of socio-political crisis from 2020 to 2024. The sources of these speeches included official government archives, public transcripts, and reputable media outlets, ensuring both authenticity and reliability of the analyzed material.

Content analysis was performed using NVivo qualitative research software, which facilitated systematic thematic coding and organization of the data. An initial coding framework was developed based on theoretical insights from populist rhetoric literature, particularly focusing on themes such as anti-elitism, emotional appeals, victimization narratives, and social polarization. Following an iterative coding process, these initial categories were refined and expanded as new patterns emerged from the analysis of the speeches. Key terms frequently encountered in populist discourses—such as references to "corruption," "national identity," "sovereignty," "betrayal," "unity," and emotionally charged language—were coded systematically, enabling quantification and comparison of their occurrence across different leaders and contexts.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, achieving a high reliability level ($\kappa = 0.84$). This rigorous validation process ensured that identified thematic patterns accurately represented populist rhetorical strategies, thereby enhancing the robustness and credibility of the research findings.

Further analytical depth was provided through semantic pattern identification using the Doc2Vec text mining model, which complements traditional thematic analysis by quantifying contextual and linguistic similarities across speech texts. Doc2Vec's neural network-based algorithm enabled the study to detect subtle semantic clusters and patterns in populist rhetoric, revealing underlying linguistic structures that might not be immediately visible through manual coding alone. By integrating this advanced computational tool, the analysis could more precisely characterize the nuances and shared rhetorical strategies used by populist leaders internationally.

The methodological triangulation of qualitative thematic coding in NVivo and computational semantic analysis using Doc2Vec allowed for a comprehensive, rigorous examination of populist rhetorical mechanisms. Through this approach, the study effectively mapped the consistent strategies employed by populist leaders to erode democratic trust, offering critical insights into the intersection between political rhetoric and democratic stability.

3. Results

The use of populist rhetoric in political discourse has increasingly shaped contemporary political discourse. Characterized by its strong emotional appeal and moralizing dichotomy, this type of rhetoric plays a significant role in mobilizing public support, especially in times of political and economic instability. Populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and others have effectively used rhetoric to consolidate their base, undermine

traditional democratic institutions, and cultivate a sense of distrust in established political norms. This section examines the main characteristics of populist rhetoric, its use in political discourse, and the resulting impact on political dynamics and democratic trust. At its core, populist rhetoric revolves around the depiction of politics as a struggle between "the people" and "the elite." This dichotomy is a central feature of what Mudde [17] has called "fine-centered ideology," and forms the basis of most populist discourses. In populist narratives, "the people" are portrayed as a homogeneous and morally upright group, while "the elite" are portrayed as corrupt, self-serving, and indifferent to the needs of the people. This simplistic and dualistic framing allows populist leaders to exploit social divisions and present themselves as the true voice of the people.

A comprehensive analysis of Viktor Orbán's speeches was conducted using a corpus consisting of his key speeches and public statements collected since 2020-2024 (Table 2). This corpus was designed to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and depictions of political narratives that are central to Orbán's leadership style.

Table 1.
Overview of speeches of Viktor Orbán.

| Date	Speech Occasion
19-Feb-20	State of the Nation
21-Sep-20	Opening of the Hungarian Parliament
6-Jun-20	Commemoration speech
19-May-22	Conservative Political Action Conference Hungary
16-May-22	Speech given by the Prime Minister after swearing his prime ministerial oath
19-Feb-23	State of the Nation
4-May-23	Conservative Political Action Conference Hungary
22-Jul-23	Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp
23-Oct-24	68th Anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and Freedom Fight
25-Apr-24	Conservative Political Action Conference Hungary

The study of this collection of speeches revealed that Orbán consistently positions himself as Hungary's defender against threats posed by external influences, including the European Union, non-governmental organizations, and global elites. In his speeches, he emphasizes the importance of national sovereignty and presents these external actors as the main sources of challenges to Hungary, portraying them as undermining Hungarian values, security, and self-determination. By framing his government's actions as a necessary response to these perceived threats, Orbán effectively legitimizes his policies in the name of protecting the interests of the people and preserving Hungary's traditional values and independence. This approach allows him to rally support at home while contrasting Hungary's path with the liberal, progressive West.

Having conducted a frequency analysis of key terms in Viktor Orbán's speeches in 2022–2024, Table 3 highlights the analysis of the main recurring phrases and themes that characterize the aforementioned leader narratives.

Table 2.
Frequency Analysis of Key Terms in Viktor Orbán's Speeches.

Term/Theme	Frequency (%)	Context in Speeches
Western world/civilization/values	0.09	Refers to the West that is dominated by progressive ideologies, secularism, and liberal elites pushing multiculturalism and globalization, which he views as threats to national sovereignty and traditional values.
Economic Stability/Isolation	0.04	References to economic policies protecting jobs, combating inflation, and prioritizing the Hungarian economy.
Christianity/Christian	0.05	Presents Hungary as a defender of Christian Europe, stressing the importance of preserving Christian culture and values against perceived external threats.
Left/Liberal	0.1	The liberal establishment is portrayed as out of touch with the real concerns of ordinary citizens, imposing top-down policies and supporting values like multiculturalism, LGBTQ rights, and economic austerity measures that, according to Orbán, erode national sovereignty and traditional values

Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the frequency of key topics in Viktor Orbán's speeches from 2020 to 2024. Its visualization allows us to understand the dynamics of accents in Orbán's rhetoric depending on the political and social context.
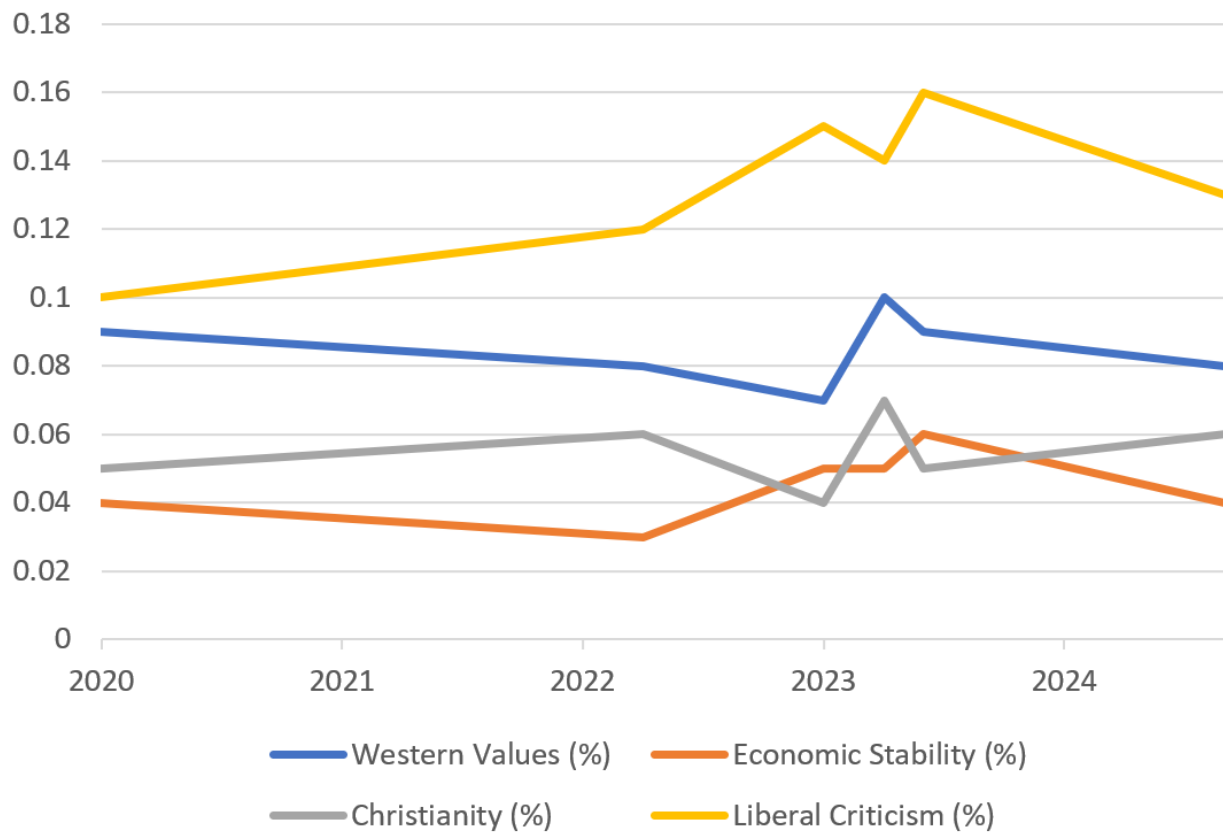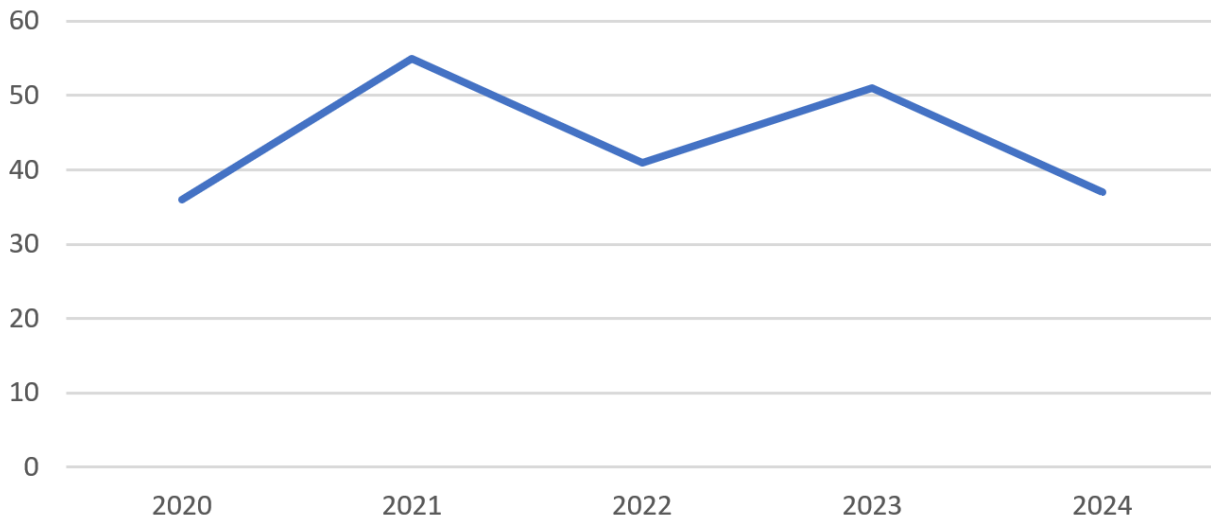
Figure 1.
Frequency of Key Terms in Viktor Orbán's Speeches Over Time.

Figure 1 shows the dynamics of public support for the Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, from 2020 to 2024. The data is based on the analysis of sociological surveys conducted in different years, reflecting the change in the level of support for the party among voters. This dynamics clearly correlates with changes in Orbán's rhetoric. The growth of support in 2020–2021 was due to his emphasis on nationalist rhetoric and criticism of liberal values, which found a response among the Hungarian electorate. For example, in 2021, Orbán actively used the themes of "defending Christian values" and opposing "Western progressive ideologies," which is confirmed by data from the Nézőpont Institute, where 55% of respondents supported the Fidesz party [18].

The decline in support in 2022 to 41% is explained by economic challenges, in particular, high inflation and international pressure on the government due to its position on the EU. At the same time, the increase in support in 2023 (to 51%) is associated with Orbán's victory in the parliamentary elections and his ability to mobilize the electorate through antagonistic rhetoric regarding EU sanctions and the preservation of national sovereignty. According to a survey by the Nézőpont Intézet [18], the 2023 campaign was aimed at supporting national identity, which again strengthened his position.

The decline to 37% in 2024 demonstrates that Fidesz's popularity has weakened significantly due to the loss of voter confidence. The main reasons were the rise of corruption scandals, increasing economic instability, and the emergence of a new opposition force, the Tisza party, which, according to Reuters [19], received 42% of the vote, overtaking Fidesz in the ratings for the first time. These developments highlight the changing political landscape in Hungary.

Figure 2.
Dynamics of public support for the Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, in 2020-2024.
Source: Nézőpont Intézet [18] and Reuters [19].

Orbán's speeches also place a significant emphasis on the populist "we-feeling" technique, which helps to create a sense of unity and solidarity between the government and the people. He often uses the pronouns "we", "our" to create a sense of collective community, where all Hungarians are part of one "we", and also creates a basis for consolidation against "common enemies". This allows us to strengthen the idea of a common struggle and shared responsibility for the future of the nation.

Narendra Modi has effectively used the "we-feeling" as a central element of his populist rhetoric, which is based on ideas of Indian cultural heritage and historical pride. His approach involved the use of religious and nationalist narratives aimed at creating a sense of unity among citizens, especially by emphasizing the importance of Hinduism as the basis of national identity [20]. In his 2014 campaign, Modi actively used the concept of the "Gujarat Model", which presented the economic growth and development of the region as a result of his governance [21]. This allowed him to create an image of a "strong man" – a leader capable of solving India's economic and social problems.

Modi's rhetoric clearly distinguishes between "true Indians," whom he describes as loyal to traditional values, and "enemies of the state," among whom he singles out Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities. During an election rally on April 21, 2024, in the state of Rajasthan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Muslims "infiltrators" and declared that the opposition Congress party, once in power, would distribute national wealth among "those who have more children"—an allusion to the Muslim community [22]. The remarks sparked outrage and accusations of inciting religious hatred. The opposition Congress party filed a formal complaint with the Election Commission of India, accusing Modi of using hate speech and violating the election code, which prohibits candidates from inciting religious tensions.

Modi has also actively used religious symbols, such as the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, to strengthen his connection with the country's Hindu majority. These actions have strengthened his position as the "Hindu Hriday Samrat" – "Emperor of Hindu hearts" [23]. At the same time, his economic policies, including the "Make in India" and "Digital India" programs, are aimed at creating an image of India as a modern and self-sufficient state with a place in the global economy [24]. Modi's rhetoric combines elements of nationalism, religion, and economic development, creating a unique "we-feeling" that mobilizes his electorate while exacerbating socio-political divisions in the country. This approach allows him to hold on to power despite challenges such as the economic crisis or farmer protests, positioning himself as the only leader capable of securing India's future.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan also turns to populist rhetoric to mobilize support and justify his rule, especially after the 2016 coup attempt. The basis of his political strategy is the concept of a "new Turkey," which aims to restore historical greatness, strengthen Islamic identity, and break with Western influence. This concept emphasizes national pride and spiritual revival, creating a clear distinction between the "pure Turkish people" and the "corrupt elites" or "external enemies" [25].

Following the 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan initiated a sweeping purge that targeted the judiciary, media, educational institutions, and the military. He accused the Hizmet movement and its leader, Fethullah Gülen, of conspiring against the state, using the events to justify a crackdown and centralization of power [26]. His rhetoric often emphasizes the existence of conspiracies on the part of the West and the European Union, which he accuses of supporting terrorists and of double standards toward Turkey [27].

Erdogan has actively drawn on the history of the Ottoman Empire as a source of inspiration. He has emphasized historical achievements, such as the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, to legitimize his vision of a "strong Turkey" that is regaining influence in the region and the world. He has also used religious symbols, including the opening of new mosques and the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, to strengthen support among conservative and religious voters [28].

In foreign policy, Erdogan has adopted populist approaches based on anti-Western rhetoric and an emphasis on Turkish sovereignty. His strategies include the personalization of international relations, including an emphasis on bilateral agreements that bypass multilateral institutions such as the EU [29]. His rhetoric also positions Turkey as a "defender of oppressed Muslims," which contributes to the image of a leader who represents the "will of the people."

However, this rhetoric contributes to the polarization of Turkish society. Secularists, ethnic minorities, especially Kurds, and political opponents are increasingly marginalized. This allows Erdogan to strengthen support among his base, but at the same time creates long-term risks for the unity of the country [30].

Marine Le Pen used a technique of appealing to the people through a "we-feeling" through the use of collective memory. Using historical images and invoking the collective memory of the French, Le Pen created in voters a sense of national unity and protection from external threats.

Among the main elements of Marine Le Pen's rhetoric are references to images of the "golden age" of France, the concept of national unity, and historical heroes such as Joan of Arc. Such appeals to historical events help create in voters a sense of "we-feeling", on the basis of which Le Pen proposes her vision of the future of France, calling for restrictions on immigration and the preservation of national identity [31].

This approach emphasizes that there is an "us" - pure, fair, truthful - and a "them" - external forces or internal enemies that prevent the realization of common goals and ideals. The "we-feeling" contributes to the fact that citizens begin to associate themselves with a homogeneous group, which is surrounded or attacked by "others" with opposing values, interests or goals. Thus, an image of a single nation or community is created, which is protected from threats from outside or from "traitors" within the country.

This technique significantly contributes to the polarization of society, as it clearly outlines the line between "us" and "them". The rhetoric of "we-feeling" intensifies feelings of opposition, exacerbating the conflict and emphasizing the idea that "we" must fight for our rights, our land or our values.

While reinforcing the sense of unity, populist leaders also emphasize the differences between "ordinary people" and "elite" who have supposedly lost touch with the "real people" and work only for themselves or for external interests. This further intensifies polarization, making rhetoric more aggressive and social and political divisions deeper. As a result, the "we-feeling" becomes the basis for the emotional mobilization of citizens and is an effective tool for dividing society into two hostile camps that feed on mutual distrust and rejection.

Donald Trump is known for his polarizing rhetoric in election campaigns, which not only attracts public attention but also actively divides society into opposing camps. In the studied corpus of speeches before the 2016 US elections (Table 4), the emphasis is on "us" and "them," creating an image of external or internal enemies who threaten "real Americans." In his discourse, "us" includes true patriots, people who support traditional American values, as well as those who adhere to conservative ideals. These include representatives of the Democratic Party, liberals, Muslim immigrants, and other groups that, in Trump's opinion, threaten the unity and security of the country.

Table 3.
Overview of the speeches of Donald Trump.

Date	Speech Occasion
16-Jun-15	Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in New York City
21-Mar-16	Remarks at the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, DC
27-Apr-16	Remarks on Foreign Policy at the National Press Club in Washington, DC
22-Jun-16	Remarks at Trump SoHo in New York City
5-Aug-16	Remarks at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay, Wisconsin
15-Aug-16	Donald Trump Addresses Radical Islamic Terrorism
15-Aug-16	Remarks at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio
19-Aug-16	Remarks at the Summit Sports and Ice Complex in Dimondale, Michigan
10-Mar-16	Donald Trump: 'I Think Islam Hates Us'

A key component of Trump's polarizing rhetoric is his emphasis on external and internal threats. In his speeches, he uses hyperbolic terms and emotionally charged phrases to heighten fear or other emotions. Trump portrays various ethnic or social groups as threats to American jobs, security, and culture, giving his electorate the feeling that their lives are at risk and that only his leadership can protect them.

During the 2016 election, Trump also actively used negative imagery against his political opponents, particularly Democratic candidates such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. He portrayed them as weak, incompetent, or traitors who put their personal interests above the interests of the country. This clear division into "bad" liberals and "right" conservative patriots allowed Trump to strengthen feelings of loyalty among his supporters and to solidify the image of an "enemy" who threatened national interests.

Trump's polarizing rhetoric has created a constant sense of crisis, where America, he says, is fighting for its survival. He has repeatedly stated that only his policies can guarantee the country's security and prosperity, reinforcing his rhetoric with ideas of American greatness and its revival. This approach has not only caused significant social divisions, but has also contributed to the fact that public discourse has become increasingly divided and filled with distrust between different groups of the population.

Table 4 illustrates the polarized and divisive discourse that Donald Trump has used, categorizing groups and individuals as part of a rhetorical strategy to create clear in-groups and out-groups. This approach is consistent with populist rhetoric, which seeks to distinguish a morally superior "us" from a threatening or corrupt "them."

Table 4.
Trump's racial, divisive and polarized discourse (US or SELVES and THEM or OTHERS).

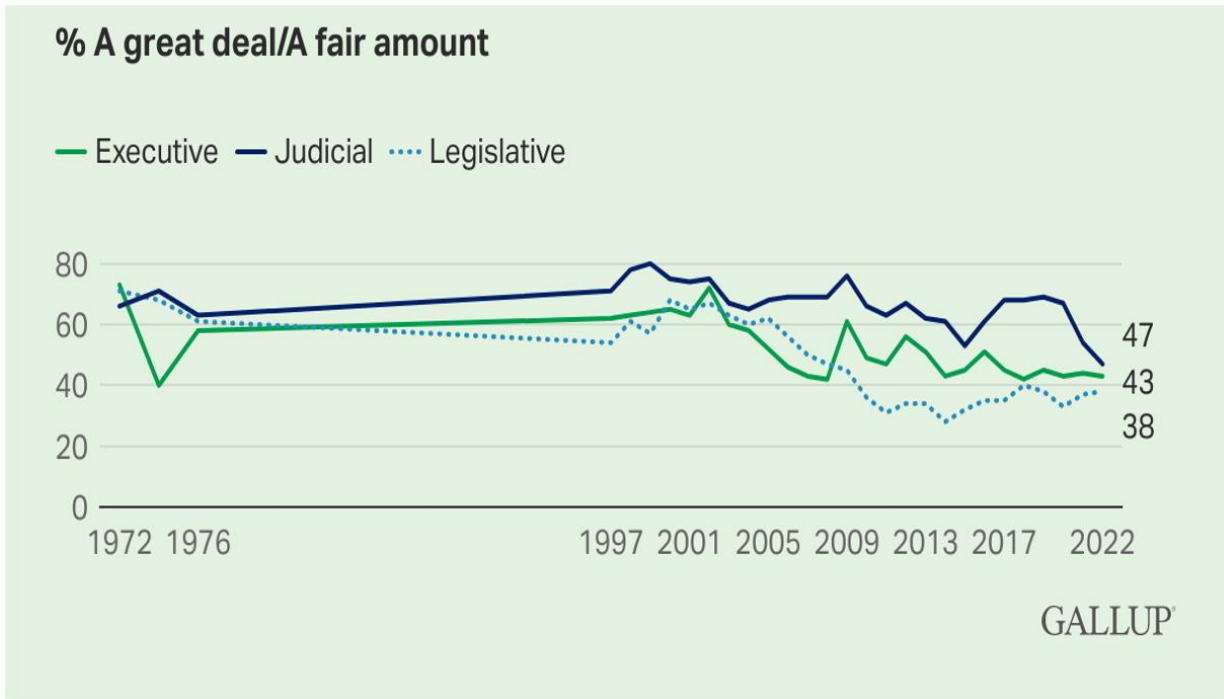| US (SELVES)		THEM (OTHERS)	
Christians	Good, positive, innocent, peaceful, targeted, wise, persecuted, and victims	Muslims	Bad, negative, terrorists, violent, peace-haters, spiteful, murderers, vengeful, evil, enemy
Israel	Ally	Iran	Enemy
Native Americans	Poor, marginalized, stolen rights, deceived, powerless, unimportant, and neglected	Immigrants and Refuges	Ascendant, dominant, important, powerful, dangerous, evil, destructive, deceptive
Trump	Good, positive, compassionate, sympathetic, wise, equitable, respectful, understandable, reformer	Obama and Clinton	Bad, negative, wrong, reckless, thoughtless, careless, false, weak, disastrous, rudderless, aimless, senseless, destructive

Source: Kadim, E. N. 2022.

In Trump's language, Christians, Israel, Native Americans, and himself are placed in a "WE" category associated with extremely positive descriptors. For example, Christians are called "good," "positive," "innocent," "peaceful," and "victims," portraying them as righteous and under threat, which evokes sympathy and solidarity among his audience. This narrative creates an image of Christians as persecuted, targeted by outside forces, and therefore deserving of protection. Similarly, Israel is presented as an ally, emphasizing solidarity and shared values against common enemies. In contrast, the "THEM" category includes Muslims, Iran, immigrants and refugees, and political opponents, all of whom are described in harsh, negative terms. Muslims are singled out in particular with descriptors such as "terrorist," "violent," and "enemy," which further reinforces stereotypes that associate Islam with extremism and positions Muslims as a direct threat to "innocent" and "peaceful" Christians. This tactic exploits fear and prejudice, viewing Muslims as dangerous "others" who are sharply opposed to American and Christian values. Similarly, Iran is labeled as an "enemy," conflated with a broader narrative of opposition to U.S. allies such as Israel, further polarizing audiences and reinforcing the divide between perceived friends and foes.

Native Americans are described in the category as "poor," "marginalized," and "neglected," which, while sympathetic, also emphasizes their vulnerability and powerlessness. This portrayal evokes pity and positions Trump as a compassionate person willing to acknowledge their plight. Immigrants and refugees, however, are labeled as "dominant," "dangerous," and "deceptive," in stark contrast to the helpless image of Native Americans. By characterizing immigrants in this way, Trump's discourse implies that they pose a powerful and insidious threat to the nation, reinforcing a narrative of fear and justifying restrictive immigration policies. This rhetoric appeals to nativist sentiments by presenting immigrants not as vulnerable safety seekers but as a force to be feared.

Depicting Obama and Clinton as "bad," "wrong," and "pernicious" also serves to delegitimize the political opposition. By associating them with terms like "reckless" and "negligent," Trump labels them as incompetent and harmful leaders, contrasting their perceived failures with his own image as "good" and a "reformer." This black-and-white approach reinforces his persona as a competent, patriotic leader capable of undoing the alleged harm done by previous administrations. In sum, the table highlights Trump's use of polarizing words to distinguish between a morally righteous in-group and a threatening, corrupt out-group, fostering a climate of division and increasing fears among his supporters.

This "us vs. them" structure is a cornerstone of Trump's populist rhetoric aimed at uniting his base against perceived external and internal threats. This leads to the next fundamental component of populist rhetoric, namely the emphasis on emotional appeals. Populist leaders typically appeal to emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment to mobilize their supporters. This emotional dimension is crucial because it allows populist leaders to bypass rational discourse and instead cultivate a sense of urgency in their audience. A study of Donald Trump's campaign speeches highlights how he used emotionally charged language full of epithets to create an "us versus them" narrative, painting immigrants and political opponents as existential threats to American security and prosperity.

% A great deal/A fair amount

— Executive — Judicial ···· Legislative

47
43
38

1972 1976   1997 2001 2005 2009 2013 2017 2022

GALLUP

Figure 3.
Americans' Trust in the Three Branches of the Federal Government.
Source: Jones [32] Trust in Federal Government Branches Continues to Falter.

This downward trend in trust has been particularly pronounced among Republicans, while Democratic trust has remained more stable Figure 4. This shift was largely due to Trump's portrayal of government institutions as political tools rather than neutral arbiters of justice.

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Party gap
	%	%	%	pct. pts.
Executive branch	86	43	7	79
Judicial branch	25	46	67	42
Legislative branch	54	36	25	29
State government	64	54	56	8
Local government	73	61	70	3

SEPT. 1-16, 2022   GALLUP

Figure 4.
Trust in U.S. Government Branches and Levels, by Political Party.
Source: Jones [32] Trust in Federal Government Branches Continues to Falter.

Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines have employed this strategy, using issues such as crime, corruption, and health crises to bolster their leadership (Figure 3, Figure 4). By framing crises as existential threats, these leaders justify their extreme measures as necessary to protect the nation's interests. Bolsonaro's analysis was conducted on a corpus of presidential addresses and general debates from 2019–2022. Duterte's analysis was conducted on an annual State of the Nation Address from 2016 to 2021. The range of years was not random but coincided with the length of these leaders' terms in office.
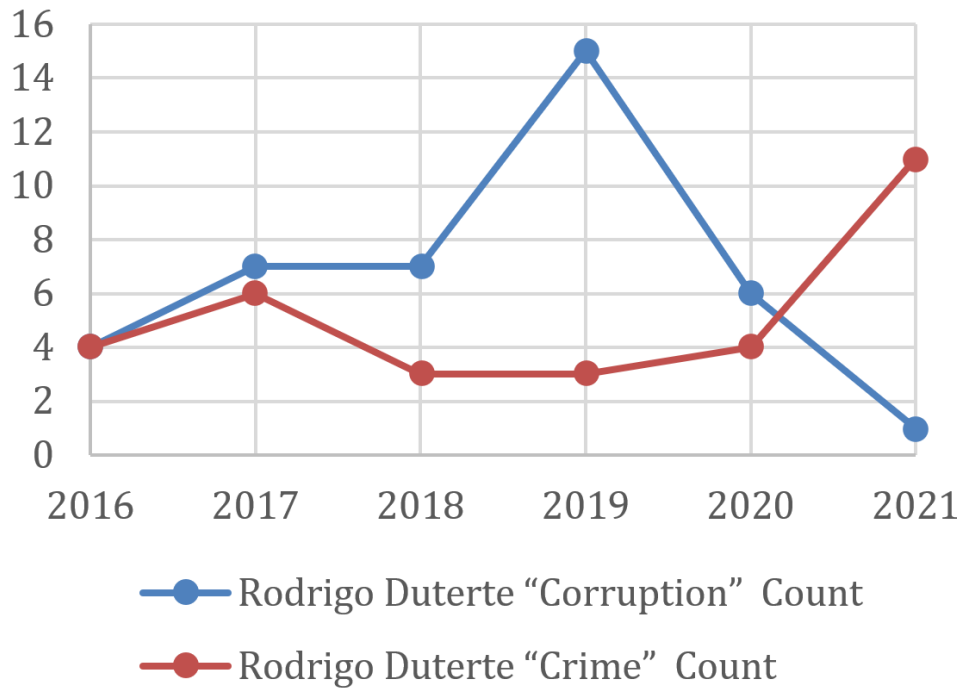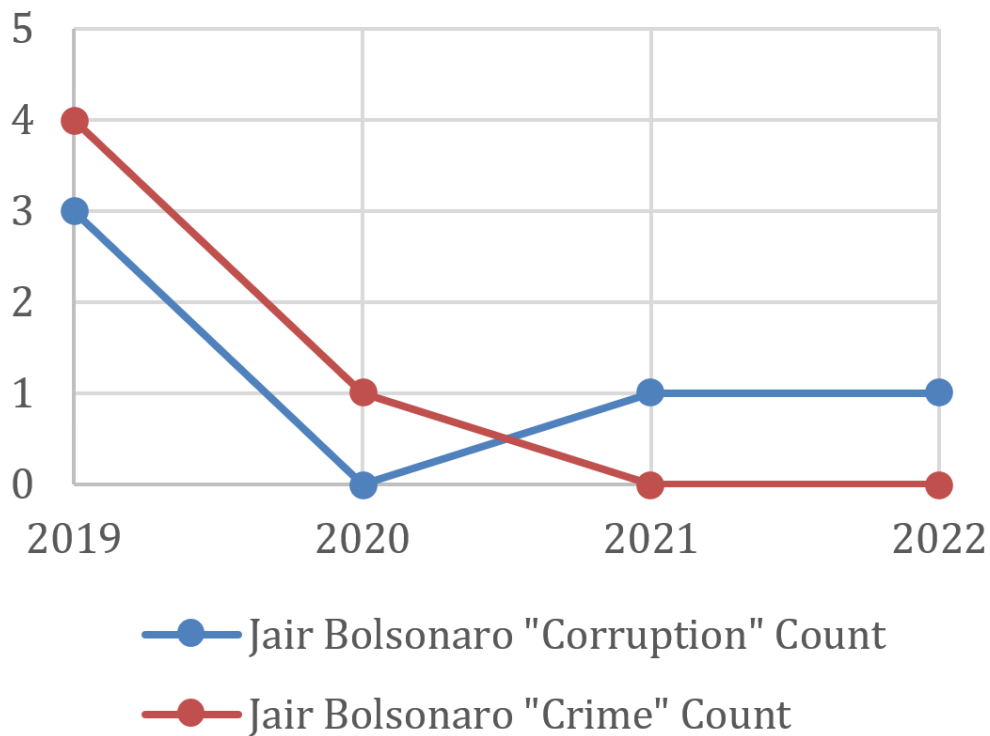
Figure 5.
Rodrigo Duerte.

Figure 6.
Jair Bolsanaro.

These leaders have positioned themselves as national saviors, willing and able to make quick, sometimes extreme, decisions in times of crisis. By framing these problems as existential threats, they justify measures that might otherwise seem excessive by arguing that these actions are necessary to protect the nation's well-being. This rhetorical tactic allows leaders to centralize power and rally citizens around a common cause, often at the expense of political and civil liberties. The first graph, which plots Rodrigo Duterte's mentions of "corruption" and "crime" from 2016 to 2021, shows the fluctuations in attention paid to these two issues. The "corruption" count, represented in blue, shows significant spikes, especially in 2019, indicating periods when Duterte has been ramping up his anti-corruption narrative. This spike could indicate moments when Duterte was trying to justify his administration's actions or deflect criticism by highlighting corruption as a pressing national issue. Conversely, the "crime" indicator, shown in orange, has remained relatively stable, except for a notable increase

in 2021, likely consistent with Duterte's broader crackdown on crime, which has been a major aspect of his administration's policies.

NET SATISFACTION RATINGS* OF PRESIDENTS: PHILIPPINES (page 2 of 2)

ARROYO (cont)	Net*	ARROYO (cont)	Net*	B. AQUINO (cont)	Net*	DUTERTE	
Dec 05	-30	Dec 09	-38	Mar 13	+59	Sep 16	+64
Ave. 2005	-25	Ave. 2009	-35	Jun 13	+64	Dec 16	+63
Mar 06	-25	Mar 10	-53	Sep 13	+49	Ave. 2016	+64
Jun 06	-13	Jun 10	-17	Dec 13	+49	Mar 17	+63
Sep 06	-11	Ave. 2010	-35	Ave. 2013	+55	Jun 17	+66
Nov 06	-13	Ave. Arroyo	- 7	Mar 14	+45	Sep 17	+48
Ave. 2006	-16			Jun 14	+25	Dec 17	+58
Feb 07	-4	B. AQUINO		Sep 14	+34	Ave. 2017	+59
Jun 07	-3	Sep 10	+60	Dec 14	+39	Mar 18	+56
Sep 07	-11	Nov 10	+64	Ave. 2014	+36	Jun 18	+45
Dec 07	-16	Ave. 2010	+62	Mar 15	+11	Sep 18	+54
Ave. 2007	-9	Mar 11	+51	Jun 15	+30	Dec 18	+60
Mar 08	-26	Jun 11	+46	Sep 15	+41	Ave. 2018	+54
Jun 08	-38	Sep 11	+56	Dec 15	+32	Mar 19	+66
Jul 08	-50	Dec 11	+58	Ave. 2015	+29	Jun 19	+68
Sep 08	-27	Ave. 2011	+53	Apr 16	+27	Sep 19	+65
Dec 08	-24	Mar 12	+49	Jun 16	+29	Dec 19	+72
Ave. 2008	-33	May 12	+42	Ave. 2016	+28	Ave. 2019	+68
Feb 09	-32	Aug 12	+67	Ave. B. Aquino	+45	Nov 20	+79
Jun 09	-31	Dec 12	+55			May 21	+65
Sep 09	-38	Ave. 2012	+53			Jun 21	+62

** Net ratings = % Satisfied minus % Dissatisfied correctly rounded.*

Figure 7.
Net Satisfaction Ratings of Philippine Presidents: Comparative Overview (2005–2021).
Scource: Social Weather Stations (2021).

Figure 5 illustrates the level of satisfaction with Duterte's performance over the course of his presidency. The combined analysis of the data shows that the shift in emphasis in Duterte's rhetoric correlates with fluctuations in his public support. In 2016, the frequency of mentions of "crimes" was high, corresponding to the start of his massive anti-drug campaign. This brought him strong support with a net rating of +64. In 2017, despite the increase in rhetoric about "corruption", support fell slightly to +59 due to international criticism of the harsh methods of the "war on drugs". In 2018, the frequency of mentions of "crimes" fell significantly, accompanied by a decrease in the rating to +54. However, in 2019, the sharp increase in rhetoric about "corruption" coincided with an increase in support to +68, demonstrating a positive response from the population to the emphasis on the fight against corruption. In 2020, Duterte's approval rating peaked (+79), even with a reduction in rhetoric that can be attributed to his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2021, approval had fallen to +62, perhaps due to growing criticism and public fatigue.

The second graph (Figure 4), which tracks Jair Bolsonaro's mentions of "corruption" and "crime" between 2019 and 2022, shows a downward trend in both categories over time. The initial emphasis in 2019, especially on "corruption," suggests that Bolsonaro, like Duterte, took advantage of the issue early in his presidency to bolster his anti-establishment image. By 2022, however, the numbers for "corruption" and "crime" are declining, suggesting a possible shift in Bolsonaro's focus or a decline in the effectiveness of these topics as rallying points for public support. This decline may reflect a shift in Bolsonaro's strategy as his administration has faced other challenges or as public sentiment on these issues has evolved.
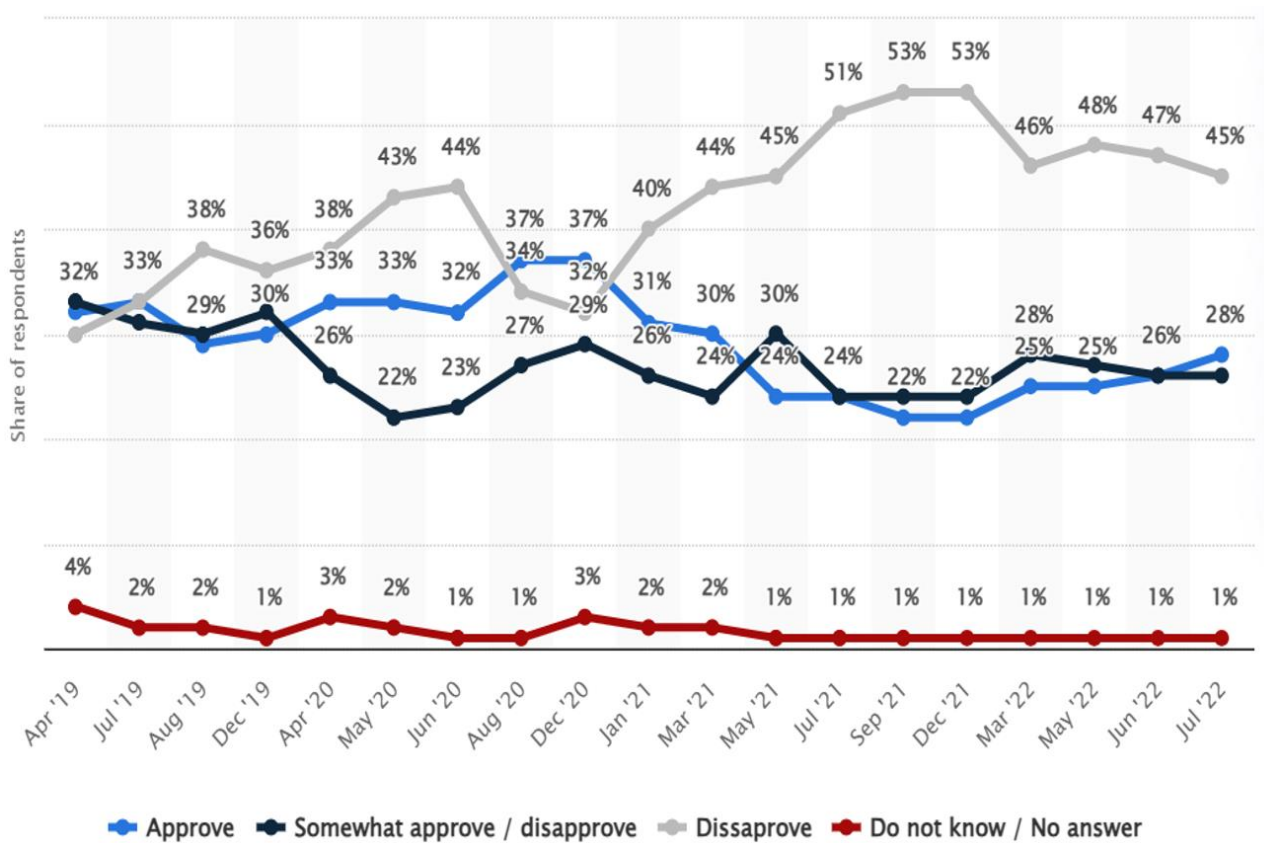
Figure 8.
Public Approval Ratings of Jair Bolsonaro 2019-2022.
Source: Statista [33]. Brazilian president Bolsonaro's approval rate 2022 | Statista.

The graphs show the dynamics of public support for Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) in correlation with his rhetoric on "corruption" and "crime." In 2019, Bolsonaro's approval rating was 32%, but it dropped to 22% in 2021 due to the pandemic, political polarization, and corruption scandals. The frequency of mentions of "corruption" and "crime" in his speeches also dropped sharply after 2019. The reduced emphasis on these topics may have contributed to the loss of support, as these issues previously mobilized his electorate.

These graphs highlight how both leaders have adapted their rhetoric over time, strategically using topics like corruption and crime to appeal to their base. The shifts in frequency likely reflect the political landscape, public opinion, and each leader's changing goals. By frequently citing these issues, Duterte and Bolsonaro have created a narrative of perpetual crisis, positioning themselves as indispensable to national security and stability. This crisis approach has contributed to the polarization of the political landscape, creating a clear divide between supporters who view these leaders as protectors and opponents who criticize their tactics as authoritarian.

These political leaders have also strategically used the theme of crisis to challenge and delegitimize traditional democratic institutions. They have portrayed these institutions as ineffective, corrupt, or even complicit in causing the crisis, which has fueled public skepticism and undermined trust in established democratic systems. According to research by Rueda [34], populist leaders see crises as an opportunity to justify their dismantling of existing checks and balances, claiming that they alone have the solution to restore order and security.

Populist rhetoric is also characterized by its simplicity and reductionism. Complex political and social issues are presented in black and white, which resonates strongly with people who are dissatisfied with or alienated from the existing political system. This dichotomous framing simplifies political discourse by presenting only two opposing forces, "the people" and "the elite," while ignoring other nuances and multifaceted perspectives. This oversimplification makes populist rhetoric very accessible, especially to those who are not very engaged in politics or who feel marginalized by traditional political narratives.

4. Conclusions

Research on populist rhetoric in political discourse has highlighted the distinctiveness of this style, which is often polarizing and simplistic, viewing politics as a struggle between "the people" and "the elite." This binary structure, seen in leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump, resonates strongly with audiences in times of uncertainty, allowing populist figures to consolidate support and position themselves as defenders of national interests. This rhetorical style emphasizes national sovereignty, traditional values, and resistance to perceived external threats, setting the stage for distrust of established democratic institutions.

The second focus examined how populist rhetoric undermines public trust in key democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, the media, and the electoral system. By portraying these institutions as part of a corrupt establishment working

against the public interest, populists contribute to widespread skepticism that weakens democratic systems. Leaders use tactics such as delegitimizing media sources that do not align with their narratives, undermining the independence of the judiciary, and questioning the integrity of elections. This creates an environment in which the executive branch consolidates power, often unchecked by the accountability mechanisms that are fundamental to democratic governance. Examples from Hungary and the United States demonstrate how these strategies can polarize society and reduce trust in key institutions, thereby threatening the stability of democratic practices.

Furthermore, this study underscores how populist leaders across various international contexts employ emotionally charged narratives that exploit socio-economic vulnerabilities and amplify existing societal divisions. By strategically adapting their rhetoric to respond to political, social, and economic crises, populist leaders position themselves as indispensable figures capable of resolving perceived existential threats. Through narratives filled with emotional appeals such as fear, anger, and resentment, these leaders circumvent rational discourse and policy debate, effectively mobilizing support among marginalized and disaffected groups.

The empirical findings demonstrate that populist rhetoric actively intensifies societal polarization, driving communities further apart by framing politics as a zero-sum game. The persistent use of divisive language, victimhood narratives, and moral dichotomies significantly deteriorates social cohesion, weakening the collective capacity for democratic engagement and constructive dialogue. Consequently, democratic institutions experience declining legitimacy as citizens become disillusioned and disengaged from participatory processes, contributing further to democratic erosion.

In conclusion, the findings of this research highlight the critical need for enhancing civic education and institutional resilience as strategies to counteract the detrimental impacts of populist rhetoric. Strengthening democratic institutions, reinforcing independent media, and fostering informed civic engagement are essential to mitigate the risks associated with populist-driven democratic instability. By illuminating the mechanisms through which populist rhetoric undermines democratic institutions, this study contributes valuable insights to scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to preserve and reinforce democratic governance.

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