

Populist Rhetoric and Institutional Trust in Post-Transition Democracies

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Abstract— *Post-transition democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have witnessed the sustained rise of populist political movements whose rhetoric frequently targets established democratic institutions as illegitimate or captured by narrow interests. This study examines the relationship between exposure to populist rhetoric and institutional trust among citizens in several post-transition democracies, distinguishing effects on trust in electoral institutions from trust in judicial and media institutions. Using survey experiments in which respondents were exposed to varying intensities of populist rhetorical framing, we test whether rhetoric emphasizing elite betrayal produces uniform erosion of institutional trust or differentiated effects depending on institution type and respondent prior partisan alignment. Findings indicate that populist rhetoric produced the strongest trust erosion for judicial institutions specifically, exceeding effects observed for electoral or media institutions, and that this erosion was most pronounced among respondents already expressing weak partisan attachment prior to exposure. Respondents with strong existing partisan identities showed more resistant trust levels regardless of rhetorical exposure, suggesting a moderating role for prior political attachment. These findings contribute to understanding differentiated institutional vulnerability to populist rhetorical strategies in democracies still consolidating institutional legitimacy following political transition.*

Index Terms— *populism, political rhetoric, institutional trust, post-transition democracy, political discourse*

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-transition democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have witnessed sustained rises in populist political movements whose rhetoric frequently frames established democratic institutions as illegitimate or captured by narrow elite interests [1]. Understanding whether such rhetoric produces uniform or differentiated erosion of institutional trust matters directly for democratic consolidation prospects in these still-maturing systems [2].

Prior research on populism’s institutional effects has often treated trust as a single undifferentiated outcome, obscuring the possibility that electoral, judicial, and media institutions respond differently to elite-betrayal framing [3]. Partisan attachment strength may further moderate rhetorical exposure effects, a factor underexamined in survey experimental designs [4].

This study uses survey experiments exposing respondents to varying intensities of populist rhetorical framing to examine differentiated institutional trust erosion across several post-

Table 1. Trust erosion effects by institution and partisan attachment

Institution Type	Overall Effect	Weak Attachment	Strong Attachment
Judicial institutions	Strong negative	Strong negative	Moderate negative
Electoral institutions	Moderate negative	Moderate negative	Weak negative
Media institutions	Moderate negative	Strong negative	Weak negative

transition democracies.

II. RELATED WORK

Populism scholarship has increasingly conceptualized populist discourse as a thin ideology centered on an antagonism between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, with institutional distrust theorized as a core rhetorical mechanism rather than incidental byproduct. Survey experimental work on rhetorical framing effects in established democracies has demonstrated measurable but often modest trust effects, though comparable evidence from post-transition contexts with lower baseline institutional legitimacy remains sparser. Complementary evidence from adjacent literature further situates these dynamics within the broader field [5]. Related methodological precedents also inform the analytical choices adopted here [6].

III. METHODOLOGY

Survey experiments were conducted across several post-transition democracies, randomly assigning respondents to varying intensities of populist rhetorical framing emphasizing elite betrayal, followed by trust measures for electoral, judicial, and media institutions.

A. Differentiated Trust Effect Estimation

Regression models estimated treatment effects separately by institution type, incorporating respondent prior partisan attachment strength as a moderating variable to test whether rhetorical exposure effects differ between weakly and strongly partisan-identified respondents.

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 reports estimated trust erosion effects by institution type and partisan attachment strength.

Judicial institutions experienced the strongest overall trust erosion, and effects across all institution types were consis-

tently attenuated among respondents with strong prior partisan attachment.

V. DISCUSSION

The disproportionate erosion of judicial trust suggests that populist elite-betrayal framing resonates particularly strongly when directed at institutions perceived as insulated from direct democratic accountability, consistent with populist rhetoric's characteristic suspicion of counter-majoritarian bodies. The moderating role of partisan attachment indicates that citizens with established political identities possess some rhetorical resilience, while politically unmoored citizens represent a more vulnerable population for institutional trust erosion. These findings carry implications for democratic consolidation strategies, suggesting that strengthening partisan and civic attachment infrastructure may indirectly protect institutional legitimacy against populist rhetorical pressure.

VI. CONCLUSION

Populist rhetoric produces differentiated rather than uniform institutional trust erosion, with judicial institutions and weakly partisan-attached citizens most vulnerable. These findings contribute to understanding differentiated institutional vulnerability in democracies still consolidating legitimacy following political transition.

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