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POPULISM IN A MULTI-SPEED WORLD: STRUCTURAL FILTERS, INEQUALITY, AND THE AI ACCELERATION

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Populism is by no means a novel phenomenon; however, its perceived dominance of global politics and the potential implications for political futures, either in developed or developing countries, have placed it at the forefront of contemporary political analysis. For conceptual clarity, both definitions of left- and right-wing populism are considered here through the so-called *ideational approach* –that is, an antagonist movement of “the people” against “the elites”¹. History shows that this struggle has been true for much of human civilisation. Identity politics, or “the people”, might be conceived in nationalist, religious, ethnic or other terms.

But populism cannot be analysed from a political theory perspective alone, nor from a global setting; rather from a Global North vs Global South lens. While populism takes different forms – anti-immigration protests reflecting cultural anxieties in advanced economies, and anti-corruption demonstrations in transitional democracies – it can be argued that the antagonist underlying driver of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is remarkably consistent. This article tells a two-tale of populism: one in Australia, where cultural and economic anxieties converge in a developed democracy context, and another in Nepal, where institutional fragility and digital repression shape youth-led mobilisation against the elites. To understand the impact of populism in both scenarios, this paper proposes a structural filter framework, which interprets how economic, institutional, and technological factors mediate the local expression of global pressures; also, it highlights artificial intelligence (AI) as an accelerating structural disruptor that amplifies economic insecurity², institutional distrust³, and information disorder⁴.

The rise of populist politics in the 21st century reflects persistent structural vulnerabilities. In developed nations, it often manifests through cultural anxieties, generational divides, and economic pressures on the middle class, creating a complex ecosystem of political sentiment.⁵ Economic stagnation and rising costs of living intersect with concerns over national identity and social cohesion, producing fertile ground for anti-elite mobilisation⁶. In developing countries, populism tends to emerge from weak institutions⁷, political instability, and recently, even the contested regulation of digital spaces, rather than middle class pressures. It is worth

¹ Hawkins, K. A., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). What the (ideational) study of populism can teach us, and what it can't. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 526–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12280>

² Rockall, E. J., Mendes Tavares, M., & Pizzinelli, C. (2025). *AI adoption and inequality* (IMF Working Paper No. 2025/068). International Monetary Fund. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798229006828.001>

³ Kilian, K. A. (2025). Beyond accidents and misuse: Decoding the structural risk dynamics of artificial intelligence. *AI & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02419-2>

⁴ López-Borrull, A., & Lopezosa, C. (2025). Mapping the impact of generative AI on disinformation: Insights from a scoping review. *Publications*, 13(3), Article 33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/publications13030033>

⁵ Zhirnov, A., et al. (2024). Precarity and populism: Explaining populist outlook and populist voting in Europe through subjective financial and work-related insecurity. *European Sociological Review*, 40(4), 704–720. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcad052>

⁶ Blanchard, E., & Willmann, G. (2016). Trade, education, and the shrinking middle class. *Journal of International Economics*, 99, 263–278. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2015.10.007>

⁷ Cachanosky, N., Bastos, J. P., Padilla, A., & Hernández, K. C. (2025). The institutional impact of left-leaning populism in Latin America. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 86, Article 102629. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2024.102629>

noting first, that the populism in Nepal is significantly driven by religious factors⁸; and second, that the working and middle class in developing countries is actually expanding –however, this emerging middle class remains more economically vulnerable than its counterparts in developed nations⁹.

Australia and Nepal illustrate the divergent drivers of political futures across contexts. They exemplify contrasting dynamics. In Australia, anti-immigration protests in 2025 have been shaped by housing pressures, generational political influence, and debates over cultural integration¹⁰. In Nepal, *Gen Z*'s unprecedented mobilisation against corruption escalated into riots against a government-imposed social media ban, highlighting the calls for a participatory and post-elitist democracy –but also, exposed the role of governance weaknesses, censorship, and digital mobilisation in shaping political outcomes and public dissent¹¹.

Populism rarely arises from a single cause. Its expression depends on the interplay between economic pressures, institutional trust, cultural causes, globalisation, digitalisation, and governance failure in leading society through change¹².

In developed countries, middle-class stagnation, rising household debt, and declining job security create fertile ground for anti-elite sentiment¹³. If such structural conditions are conducive to populist mobilisation, and the real or perceived erosion of the middle class persists in Australia, the emergence of stronger anti-immigration sentiment can be seen as Australia's iteration of a wider global pattern. This is a space to watch very carefully. While the picture in Australia is more complex than in Europe, and Australia's political system remains more robust compared with the US, there is evidence of growing populist sentiment among different segments of the electorate. Some sources have inferred at the closure of domestic industries such as car manufacturing (Oct, 2017), which would have left lasting structural effects on regional employment, influencing not only economic prospects but also community identity and social cohesion¹⁴. Simultaneously, social and cultural anxieties amplify these economic pressures, generating support for populist rhetoric even among economically secure groups¹⁵. It's a consistent global pattern where middle-income households worldwide, historically the

⁸ Acharya, A. (2024). The politics of faith: Religious nationalism and Nepal's democratic landscape. *Journal of Political Science*, 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v24i1.62854>

⁹ Oxford Economics. (2024). *The future of the middle class in emerging markets* (White Paper, October 16, 2024). <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/the-future-of-the-middle-class-in-emerging-markets/>

¹⁰ Wood, D., Daley, J., & Chivers, C. (2018). Australia demonstrates the rise of populism is about more than economics. *Australian Economic Review*, 51(3), 399–410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8462.12294>

¹¹ Wong, T. (2025, September 25). *The Gen Z uprising in Asia shows social media is a double-edged sword*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4ljv39em7o>

¹² Aiginger, K. (2020). Populism: Root causes, power grabbing and counter strategy. *Intereconomics*, 55(1), 38–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-020-0867-3>

¹³ Rodríguez-Pose, A., Terrero-Dávila, J., & Lee, N. (2023). Left-behind versus unequal places: Interpersonal inequality, economic decline and the rise of populism in the USA and Europe. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 23(5), 951–977. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbad005>

¹⁴ Conley, T. (2022). The decline and fall of the Australian automotive industry. *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 33(2), 415–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10353046221079870>

¹⁵ Scheiring, G., Serrano-Alarcón, M., Moise, A., McNamara, C., & Stuckler, D. (2024). The populist backlash against globalization: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *British Journal of Political Science*, 54(3), 892–916. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000024>

backbone of political moderation, are indeed increasingly susceptible to populist appeals when economic and cultural pressures coincide¹⁶.

As in other OECD countries, anti-immigration sentiment in Australia has eventually surged alongside debates over housing affordability, infrastructure strain, and the preservation of cultural identity. The creeping populist undercurrent is therefore already manifesting in the rise of parties such as right-wing populist One Nation Party (ONP)¹⁷. Even when initially marginalised, far-right parties can capitalise on public discontent and institutional challenges to achieve political prominence, and for ONP, it materialised in the 2025 federal election, adding two more senators to their representation in the Australian Parliament¹⁸.

Populism is not simply a reaction to migration, but to a constellation of structural pressures that are more or less consistent across the developed world: economic inequality combined with perceived cultural threats to generate political mobilisation. Comparative evidence from Europe and North America indicates similar patterns, suggesting that liberal democracies in the Global North share structural vulnerabilities that can produce similar populist outcomes despite differing cultural and policy contexts.

Populism is a global phenomenon, but its causal drivers diverge. Whereas in established democracies, the rise of populism is often linked to cultural threat narratives, in developing countries, populist mobilisation tends to emerge from institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and widespread perceptions of state unresponsiveness, rather than from cultural conflict. Economic precarity may contribute, but it is typically the interaction of institutional fragility, elite corruption and weak accountability that generates fertile ground for anti-establishment movements¹⁹. The endpoints look similar: anti-elite sentiment and anti-establishment mobilisation; but the underlying mechanisms differ, and this variation is analytically important.

In Nepal, for example, youth –a cohort already burdened by limited employment opportunities– have mobilised not simply in reaction to economic hardship, but in response to systemic institutional weakness and a pervasive lack of accountability. Political mobilisation stems less from material deprivation or cultural conflict, and more from widespread public

¹⁶ Stoetzer, L. F., Giesecke, J., & Kluver, H. (2025). Perceived inequality and populism. *European Journal of Political Research*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676525100078>

¹⁷ Jian, H. (2025). The rising far right in Australia: A diachronic case analysis of the One Nation Party and Australia's political environment. *Advances in Politics and Economics*, 8(1), 66–85. <https://doi.org/10.22158/ape.v8n1p66>

¹⁸ Jervis-Bardy, D. (2025, October 8). *The ground is shifting: What's driving One Nation's surge and could it replace the floundering Liberals?* The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/oct/07/the-ground-is-shifting-whats-driving-one-nations-surge-and-could-it-replace-the-floundering-liberals>

¹⁹ Talukdar, S. (2019). Populist resurgence in South Asia: An empirical perspective. *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research*, 6(1), 84–103. <https://doi.org/10.46291/IJOSPERvol6iss1pp84-103>

perceptions that state institutions are self-serving, unresponsive, and divorced from citizens' needs²⁰.

Technology —and increasingly AI-driven content moderation and amplification— further intensifies these dynamics, shaping public perception and influencing electoral behaviour. Social media becomes simultaneously a space for political organisation and a vector for contestation. This was again evident during the 2025 protests in Nepal, which were sparked by the government's decision to impose a social-media ban²¹. Primarily driven by government overreach, censorship, and weak institutional channels for political accountability, the social media ban triggered widespread protests, reflecting frustration with governance and the restriction of freedoms rather than economic pressures. Digital platforms function as both organisational tools and sources of contention: they allow rapid mobilisation but also generate friction when governments attempt to control information flows.

Political instability, weak enforcement of anti-corruption measures, and limited capacity for digital governance interact to produce distinctive forms of populism. AI will increasingly affect governance and public trust as adoption expands, necessitating anticipatory regulation and oversight. The rise of populism underscores the importance of digital literacy and institutional responsiveness in shaping how populations react to new technological pressures.

Across contexts, technology, including recent forms of AI, acts as a multiplier of structural pressures. Algorithmically curated information ecosystems can intensify polarisation, amplify grievances, and destabilise public trust. AI-driven automation reshapes labour markets unevenly, threatening middle-income occupations in developed economies while altering employment structures in emerging markets. Algorithmic decision-making in governance, if unregulated, can erode legitimacy and provoke resistance, particularly in countries with weak institutional oversight. Recent studies suggest that the rate of adoption and integration of AI systems significantly conditions the scale and form of political mobilisation, creating new inequalities between digitally advanced and digitally lagging societies²². AI represents a novel and accelerating structural force. By reshaping labour markets, mediating public discourse, and concentrating institutional power, AI can intensify populist pressures in both high- and low-capacity states. In developed countries, automation and algorithmic information ecosystems threaten middle-income livelihoods and cultural cohesion.

²⁰ Acharya, A. (2024). Influence of youth engagement on Nepal's political evolution: An analysis of emerging youth-led movements. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijmss.v5i2.69438>

²¹ ABC News. (2025, September 10). A deadly 'Gen Z' protest in Nepal was sparked by a social media ban. But the anger goes beyond blocked apps. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-10/nepal-kathmandu-gen-z-protests-social-media/105756398>

²² Zidouemba, M. T. (2025). Governance and artificial intelligence: The use of artificial intelligence in democracy and its impacts on the rights to participation. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, 5, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-025-00229-5>

In developing countries, rapid adoption without regulatory safeguards risks deepening distrust in governance and eroding civil liberties. AI's influence underscores the urgency of integrating technology governance into broader social and economic policy. Democratic resilience will depend on the capacity to manage AI-driven disruption in ways that preserve legitimacy, protect rights, and reduce the risk of populist backlash. Scholars increasingly argue that AI will act as both a magnifier and accelerator of pre-existing inequalities, necessitating a proactive and anticipatory approach to policy design²³.

Addressing the risks of populist movements requires attention to structural conditions rather than narrow interventions. Although this paper is analytical, several policy-relevant insights emerge:

- Ensuring access to secure employment, housing, and social mobility reduces the material grievances that often catalyse populism.
- Strengthening transparency, anti-corruption frameworks, and participatory governance enhances public trust.
- Investing in civic literacy, intergenerational dialogue, and inclusive policies mitigates identity-based anxieties.
- Proactive oversight of AI and digital platforms, combined with education and transparency, helps prevent the amplification of polarisation and misinformation.

These lessons apply across contexts, though the relative emphasis differs: economic measures are more salient in Australia, institutional reform in Nepal, and AI governance is increasingly globally relevant. Adding international comparative insights and longitudinal data on social and economic trends further contextualises these findings, illustrating the multi-speed dynamics of contemporary populism.

The two-tale of populism emphasises that while immediate triggers may diverge, convergent structural pressures across different societies produce comparable challenges for governance and societal cohesion. Australia and Nepal illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of populism. Although contexts differ, the underlying structural drivers are consistent: economic insecurity, institutional distrust, and technological mediation.

AI is emerging as a transformative force that amplifies these drivers across the globe. Understanding populism through the lens of structural filters allows policymakers to design interventions that address both root causes and accelerating pressures, balancing scholarly insight with practical policy relevance. By integrating economic, institutional, social, and technological considerations, democracies can strengthen resilience against populist pressures in an age of rapid change.

²³ Bircan, T., & Özbilgin, M. F. (2025). Unmasking inequalities of the code: Disentangling the nexus of AI and inequality. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 211, Article 123925. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2024.123925>