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Populism, Political Elites and Democratic Representation in Nigeria: Rethinking the Relationship Between Popular Discontent and Institutional Politics.

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Abstract

Populist politics has become increasingly visible in contemporary African political competition, particularly where citizens express dissatisfaction with political elites and the performance of representative institutions. This article examines how such dissatisfaction creates space for populist mobilization and how populist politics shapes democratic representation in Nigeria and selected African contexts. The study draws on the ideational approach to populism, elite theory and representative democracy theory. Methodologically, it uses qualitative documentary analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, institutional reports and other credible secondary sources selected for their relevance to populism, elite politics and democratic representation. Nigeria provides the main context of analysis, while experiences from South Africa, Uganda and other African countries are used to provide broader contextual insight rather than as formally matched comparative cases. The evidence is examined thematically, with particular attention to popular discontent, elite accountability, political mobilization, representation and institutional responses. The findings suggest that corruption, inequality, economic hardship, weak accountability and limited responsiveness can deepen perceptions of a gap between citizens and political elites, creating conditions for populist mobilization. Populist actors can bring neglected grievances into public debate and give greater visibility to groups that feel politically excluded. However, claims to represent the "real people" may also weaken political pluralism and challenge institutional checks when political authority becomes concentrated. The article therefore argues that the democratic implications of populism depend largely on the institutional environment through which popular demands are expressed, mediated and constrained.

Keywords: Populism, Political Elites, Democratic Representation, Popular Discontent, African Politics

Introduction

The resurgence of populism has renewed debates about political representation, elite accountability and democratic governance across different political systems. Populism generally constructs politics around a distinction between "the people" and "the elite," with populist actors presenting themselves as authentic representatives of ordinary citizens and as alternatives to established political authorities (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In Africa, this dynamic is particularly relevant because political competition continues to operate within contexts marked by corruption, socioeconomic inequality, unemployment, weak public service delivery, political exclusion and concerns about institutional accountability (Bratton & Chang, 2006). These conditions can deepen citizens' perceptions that political institutions and established elites are disconnected from everyday social and economic realities.

African populism takes diverse forms, emerging through political parties, social movements, electoral campaigns and individual political actors. Its appeal often reflects dissatisfaction with established political elites and institutions perceived as distant from or unresponsive to citizens (Resnick, 2019). However, the relationship between populism and democracy remains contested and cannot be understood in purely positive or negative terms. Populist politics can challenge entrenched elite domination, bring neglected grievances into public debate and increase the political visibility of groups that feel excluded from conventional political processes (Canavan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). At the same time, populist claims to speak exclusively for "the people" can create tensions with political pluralism, institutional checks and the legitimacy of competing interests (Müller, 2016). The tension therefore lies partly in the way populist actors translate popular grievances into political claims and in how democratic institutions respond to those claims.

This debate is closely connected to the quality of political representation. Political representation involves more than the periodic election of leaders; it also concerns the substantive relationship between citizens and those who exercise political authority on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 2003). Representation becomes problematic when citizens perceive elected officials as primarily responsive to political elites, powerful interests or narrow networks rather than to broader public demands. Although African political elites are socially and politically diverse rather than a single homogeneous group, perceptions of privilege, exclusion, corruption and limited responsiveness can contribute to popular dissatisfaction (Handley, 2024). Where conventional political institutions appear unable or unwilling to respond adequately to citizens' concerns, such dissatisfaction can provide opportunities for populist mobilization and anti-establishment political appeals (Roberts, 2016).

Recent evidence further suggests that many Africans continue to value democratic government while expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of democratic institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). This distinction is significant because dissatisfaction

with political institutions does not necessarily represent a rejection of democracy itself. Rather, it may reflect demands for more responsive, accountable and inclusive forms of political representation. Citizens may support democratic principles while simultaneously questioning the effectiveness of elected representatives, political parties, legislatures and other institutions responsible for translating public preferences into government action. Populist mobilization can therefore be understood partly as a response to perceived representational gaps, although its consequences may vary depending on the institutional environment in which it develops.

Nigeria provides an important setting for examining these dynamics. As Africa's most populous country and one of the continent's major electoral democracies, Nigeria combines competitive electoral politics with persistent concerns about corruption, inequality, socioeconomic hardship, political accountability and institutional responsiveness. These conditions have created recurring debates about the distance between political elites and ordinary citizens and about whether representative institutions adequately reflect popular interests. At the same time, political dissatisfaction should not automatically be interpreted as a rejection of democratic governance. It is necessary to examine how grievances are politically organized, how actors use them to construct claims about "the people" and "the elite," and how representative institutions respond to these pressures.

Against this background, the central research question guiding this article is: How does populist mobilization of popular discontent challenge, reproduce, or reshape elite domination and democratic representation in Nigeria? The article examines how popular grievances are translated into populist mobilization, how populist actors engage with political elites and representative institutions, and how institutional conditions influence the consequences of these interactions. It is particularly concerned with whether populist mobilization strengthens citizens' capacity to demand accountability and responsiveness or whether it can reproduce forms of political concentration by allowing particular actors to claim exclusive authority to speak for the people.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative documentary research design. It draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, edited book chapters, institutional reports and other credible secondary sources selected purposively on the basis of their relevance, credibility and analytical contribution to the study of populism, political elites and democratic representation. Foundational works are used to establish the conceptual and theoretical foundations, while more recent scholarship and institutional evidence provide insight into contemporary African and Nigerian political developments. Nigeria serves as the primary context of analysis, while evidence from South Africa, Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and other African settings is used illustratively rather than as part of a formally matched comparative study. The documentary evidence is examined thematically around popular discontent, elite accountability and reproduction, populist mobilization, political representation and institutional consequences. These themes are

interpreted through the ideational approach to populism, elite theory and representative democracy theory, allowing the analysis to trace the relationship from popular discontent to populist mobilization, interaction with political elites, institutional mediation and consequences for democratic representation.

The theoretical combination is important because no single perspective fully captures the relationship examined in this study. The ideational approach explains how populist actors construct political conflict between "the people" and "the elite." Elite theory draws attention to the concentration, reproduction and exercise of political power, while representative democracy theory provides a basis for examining responsiveness, accountability, inclusion and the institutional mediation of citizens' demands. Bringing these perspectives together makes it possible to move beyond treating populism simply as an electoral strategy or an expression of anti-elite sentiment. Instead, the article considers how populist mobilization emerges from perceived representational shortcomings and how its democratic consequences are shaped by existing institutional arrangements.

The article contributes to the literature in three related ways. First, it provides a Nigeria-focused analysis of the relationship between populism, political elites and democratic representation while situating the discussion within broader African experiences. Second, it brings together the ideational approach to populism, elite theory and representative democracy theory as complementary analytical perspectives rather than treating them as separate descriptive frameworks. Third, it develops an integrated explanation in which popular discontent creates opportunities for populist mobilization, populist actors interact with existing elite structures and representative institutions, and the institutional environment influences whether such politics expands responsiveness, strengthens accountability or contributes to the concentration of political power. In this respect, the article treats populism neither as inherently democratic nor inherently anti-democratic, but as a form of political mobilization whose consequences depend significantly on the institutions through which popular demands are expressed and contested.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the conceptual and empirical literature on populism, political elites and democratic representation. The third section presents the theoretical framework and explains the relationship among the three perspectives. The fourth section provides the detailed methodological discussion, including the documentary evidence, source selection, contextual focus and analytical procedure. The fifth section examines populism, popular discontent and elite politics in Nigeria, followed by an analysis of democratic representation and selected African contexts. The article then discusses the findings before concluding with the broader implications of the study and recommendations.

Conceptual and Literature Review.

Populism is commonly understood as a thin-centered ideology that divides society between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" and argues that politics should reflect

the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This conceptualization is useful because it directs attention to the way political actors construct social and political conflict, rather than treating populism simply as a policy position or a style of campaigning.

In African contexts, populism often emerges where citizens perceive political institutions as distant, unresponsive or dominated by established elites. Resnick (2019) notes that African populism combines ideological, strategic and performative elements, enabling political actors to mobilize marginalized groups through anti-elite appeals. Economic hardship, unemployment, inequality, corruption, weak public services and political exclusion can therefore create grievances that become politically significant when political entrepreneurs transform them into an anti-establishment narrative (Roberts, 2016).

Popular discontent, however, should not be equated automatically with populism. Citizens may be dissatisfied with governments or elites without supporting populist actors. The analytical link is instead one of opportunity: unresolved grievances may provide political resources that actors can frame as evidence of a gap between ordinary citizens and established political institutions. Populist mobilization occurs when such grievances are organized around a people-versus-elite distinction.

Classical elite theorists argue that political power tends to concentrate within relatively small and organized groups, even under democratic systems (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939; Michels, 1911). The existence of elites is therefore not necessarily incompatible with democracy. The central issue for this study is whether elites remain accountable and responsive to citizens and whether political institutions provide mechanisms through which elite power can be challenged.

African political elites should not be treated as a single, unified ruling class. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes their social, political and transnational diversity (Handley, 2024). Nevertheless, perceptions of privilege, exclusion and poor governance may generate anti-establishment sentiment. Elite–citizen relations are therefore examined in this article through the dimensions of accountability, responsiveness and accessibility rather than through the mere existence of elites.

Populism and Representative Democracy

Political representation involves more than electing leaders. It also concerns the relationship between representatives and citizens and the extent to which citizens' interests are articulated and acted upon within political institutions (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 2003). From this perspective, populism may emerge where conventional representative institutions are perceived as failing to incorporate citizens effectively.

The literature presents competing interpretations of the democratic implications of populism. The corrective perspective emphasizes the capacity of populist movements to challenge unresponsive elites, represent marginalized groups and introduce neglected issues into political agendas (Canovan, 1999; Werner & Giebler, 2019). The opposing perspective emphasizes anti-pluralist tendencies. Müller (2016) argues that populist leaders may claim exclusive ownership of the popular will and thereby delegitimize political opponents and institutional constraints. Ruth-Lovell and Grahn (2023) similarly demonstrate that populism can have different effects across dimensions of democracy.

The literature therefore suggests that populism should not be classified simply as either democratic or anti-democratic. Its consequences depend on whether political mobilization expands citizen influence while preserving institutional pluralism, accountability and constraints on political power. African experiences demonstrate that populism can have different institutional consequences. Resnick (2019) shows that populist leaders may initially challenge elite domination but, after gaining power, may use popular legitimacy to bypass institutions and weaken constraints on executive authority. The experience of Ghana under Jerry Rawlings illustrates the complexity of anti-establishment and institutional politics, while evidence from other African settings shows how opposition movements can challenge established political arrangements (Haynes, 2023; Kleine, 2024). These experiences indicate that the consequences of populism are mediated by institutional conditions. Where legislatures, courts, electoral institutions, political parties, civil society and the media can constrain political power, populist pressures may contribute to competition and institutional reform. Where such constraints are weak, populist leaders may use popular legitimacy to justify political concentration.

Nigeria provides an important context for examining these dynamics because democratic politics has developed alongside persistent concerns about corruption, socioeconomic inequality, public service delivery, electoral administration and institutional trust. The 2023 general election provides a particularly relevant contemporary setting because it combined legal and technological reforms with continuing concerns about institutional capacity, electoral security, public confidence and the management of results. The Nigerian case also illustrates the distinction between dissatisfaction with particular institutions and rejection of democratic competition. Evidence presented in the documentary sources indicates that citizens may support elections and political competition while expressing limited confidence in electoral institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). This makes Nigeria useful for examining how popular dissatisfaction can coexist with continued demand for democratic representation.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Populist Ideational Approach, principally associated with Mudde (2004) and further developed by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017). The approach

conceptualizes populism as a set of ideas that constructs society as fundamentally divided between two internally homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” From this perspective, populism is based on the claim that legitimate political authority should reflect the general will of the people and that political elites, institutions or established political actors may have become detached from the interests and preferences of ordinary citizens. The approach is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for explaining how popular discontent is transformed into political narratives, demands and mobilization.

The central analytical value of the Populist Ideational Approach lies in its distinction between the people and the elite. Populist discourse does not simply express dissatisfaction with government performance; it often interprets political and socioeconomic grievances through a moralized opposition between ordinary citizens and an established political class. Consequently, issues such as unemployment, economic hardship, corruption, political exclusion, poor public services, inequality and perceived governmental unresponsiveness can be framed as evidence that political elites no longer represent the interests of the people. The significance of this perspective for the present study is therefore that it shifts attention from grievances alone to the political construction and articulation of those grievances.

Within this framework, popular discontent is understood as a political condition that can provide an environment for populist appeals, but discontent itself does not automatically constitute populism. What makes a political claim populist is the manner in which grievances are interpreted and communicated. Political actors may portray themselves as representatives of ordinary citizens while presenting established political actors as an unresponsive or self-serving elite. In this sense, populism involves a particular way of constructing political conflict. The analytical focus is therefore not merely on whether citizens are dissatisfied, but on how political actors interpret that dissatisfaction, who they identify as responsible for it, and how they claim to represent the affected population.

For the purpose of this study, the Populist Ideational Approach is operationalized through three interconnected dimensions: people-versus-elite discourse, anti-establishment rhetoric, and claims to popular sovereignty. People-versus-elite discourse refers to political narratives that construct ordinary citizens as a morally legitimate collective whose interests are contrasted with those of political, economic or institutional elites. This dimension makes it possible to examine how political actors identify “the people” and define the groups presented as responsible for their grievances. It also provides an analytical basis for examining whether political discourse creates a sharp distinction between citizens and established political authorities.

The second dimension, anti-establishment rhetoric, concerns political claims that established political actors, institutions or governing arrangements have failed to respond adequately to citizens' interests. Anti-establishment rhetoric may be expressed through criticism of political parties, government institutions, political office holders or

established patterns of governance. In the context of this study, this dimension is important because it helps explain how dissatisfaction with existing political arrangements can be transformed into challenges against established political authority. It also allows the study to distinguish ordinary criticism of government from broader populist narratives that portray the political establishment as fundamentally disconnected from ordinary citizens.

The third dimension, popular sovereignty, focuses on claims that political authority should ultimately reflect the will and preferences of ordinary citizens. Populist actors frequently present themselves as direct interpreters or defenders of the people's will, particularly where existing representative institutions are portrayed as failing to express popular preferences. This dimension enables the study to examine how political actors invoke the people as the ultimate source of political legitimacy and how such claims influence political participation, demands for accountability and challenges to established institutions.

The framework further provides an analytical basis for understanding the relationship between popular discontent and political mobilization. Discontent may exist without producing sustained political action. It becomes politically consequential when political actors provide citizens with an interpretive framework through which their grievances can be understood. Populist actors can perform this function by connecting diverse grievances to a common explanation centered on the failure or self-interest of political elites. Through this process, otherwise separate concerns may be incorporated into a broader political narrative that presents the people as a collective whose interests require political recognition.

The Populist Ideational Approach is also useful for examining the dual character of populist mobilization. On the one hand, populist appeals may draw attention to citizens' grievances, demand greater accountability and challenge political arrangements perceived as unresponsive. On the other hand, the concentration of political legitimacy in claims to represent the “true” or “authentic” people may generate tensions with pluralism, institutional constraints and the diversity of interests that characterizes representative democracy. The framework therefore allows the study to examine populism without assuming in advance that populist politics is either inherently democratic or inherently undemocratic. Instead, attention is directed to the political claims being made, the actors making them, and their implications for political representation and institutional relationships.

The theory is particularly appropriate because it brings together the central concepts examined in this study: popular discontent, political elites, populist discourse and political mobilization. Rather than treating these concepts as independent phenomena, the framework explains their relationship through the construction of political antagonism between “the people” and “the elite.” It therefore provides a coherent analytical structure for examining how grievances are articulated, how political actors construct their

legitimacy, how citizens are mobilized around shared perceptions of exclusion or dissatisfaction, and how such mobilization interacts with established political institutions. Accordingly, the study applies the Populist Ideational Approach not simply to identify the presence of populist language but to examine the process through which popular grievances are politically constructed and mobilized. The analysis focuses on whether political actors employ people-versus-elite narratives, whether they use anti-establishment claims to explain citizens' grievances, and whether they invoke popular sovereignty to establish political legitimacy. These dimensions provide observable indicators through which the relationship between popular discontent and populist political mobilization can be systematically examined.

In this respect, the Populist Ideational Approach offers a focused theoretical foundation for the study. It avoids the analytical fragmentation that may arise from applying three theories simultaneously while retaining the central elements of the research problem. Elite power and representative institutions remain important empirical concerns, but they are examined as components of the political context within which populist ideas emerge and operate rather than as separate theoretical frameworks. This gives the study a clearer theoretical identity and makes the relationship between its key concepts more explicit.

Major Findings and Discussion

The study is anchored on the Populist Ideational Approach, which conceptualizes populism through the construction of politics as a struggle between “the people” and “the elite” (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). From this perspective, popular discontent does not automatically constitute populism. Rather, socioeconomic and political grievances become politically significant when political actors interpret and organize them through narratives that portray ordinary citizens as a collective whose interests have been neglected by established political elites. The Nigerian evidence demonstrates that economic hardship, inequality, unemployment, corruption, inadequate public services and limited political accountability can create conditions within which populist narratives emerge.

The findings support the argument that populism is not simply a reflection of dissatisfaction but a particular way of constructing political conflict. Political actors can transform dispersed grievances into a broader political narrative by identifying established elites or institutions as responsible for citizens’ difficulties and presenting themselves as defenders of “the people.” In Nigeria, dissatisfaction with political institutions can coexist with continued support for democratic principles and electoral competition. Popular discontent should therefore not automatically be interpreted as rejection of democracy, but may reflect dissatisfaction with the performance and responsiveness of representative institutions.

The findings reveal that representational deficits provide an important condition for popular discontent and subsequent populist mobilization. Economic hardship,

unemployment, inequality, corruption, poor public services and limited accountability can create a gap between citizens' expectations and their perceptions of political performance. However, these grievances do not automatically produce populism. Their political significance depends on how political actors interpret and articulate them as evidence of conflict between ordinary citizens and established political elites.
The Nigerian evidence indicates that citizens can support democratic elections while expressing dissatisfaction with political institutions. Evidence reported by Afrobarometer (2024) suggests that citizens may continue to support elections and political competition while expressing limited trust in electoral institutions. This distinction indicates that discontent may be directed towards institutional performance rather than democratic representation itself. Such conditions can create opportunities for political actors to construct people-versus-elite narratives, although their consequences depend on the wider institutional environment.
The findings further show that anti-elite politics can make marginalized or neglected grievances more visible within political competition. Populist actors may portray established political elites as detached from ordinary citizens while presenting themselves as alternative representatives of popular interests (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In this sense, populist mobilization can have a corrective representational function by broadening political debate and encouraging greater participation. This is consistent with Canovan's (1999) argument concerning the tension between the populist and pragmatic dimensions of democracy and Pitkin's (1967) understanding of representation. However, this inclusionary potential depends on whether populist mobilization remains compatible with pluralism, accountability and institutional representation.
The study also finds that populist mobilization operates through the political construction of "the people" as a collective political subject. Political actors can connect different forms of dissatisfaction into a broader narrative of political exclusion, elite domination or institutional failure. In the Nigerian context, unresolved grievances can therefore be transformed into a political struggle between ordinary citizens and established political interests. This reinforces the distinction between popular discontent and populism: citizens may experience dissatisfaction without adopting populist identities, while political actors can give such dissatisfaction a collective political direction.
The findings further establish an important relationship between electoral reform, institutional trust and the limits of technological solutions. The 2023 Nigerian general election introduced significant legal and technological reforms, including the Electoral Act 2022, BVAS and IReV. These reforms sought to improve voter accreditation and results management, but they did not independently resolve wider concerns relating to institutional capacity, public confidence, operational challenges and electoral security. The evidence therefore suggests that technological innovation can improve electoral procedures without necessarily resolving deeper problems of political trust and institutional responsiveness.

The 2023 electoral experience also demonstrates that institutional reform is an ongoing process. Although BVAS and IReV strengthened the technological dimension of electoral administration, post-election assessments identified technical, logistical and operational challenges. INEC's post-election review and recommendations further indicate that electoral reform requires continuous institutional improvement. Electoral security also remained an important constraint, demonstrating that the effectiveness of electoral institutions depends on the wider political and security environment. At the same time, continued support for elections and political competition indicates that dissatisfaction with electoral institutions does not necessarily amount to rejection of democratic competition.

Another major finding is that populist mobilization may challenge established elites without necessarily eliminating elite domination. Populist actors may initially present themselves as outsiders or representatives of ordinary citizens but can become incorporated into existing structures of political authority. When leaders claim exclusive authority to speak for "the people," political legitimacy may become concentrated around individuals rather than representative institutions. Müller (2016) highlights the danger of such claims because they can delegitimize opposition and weaken the pluralist institutions necessary for democratic accountability. Populism can therefore transform or reproduce elite power rather than simply eliminate it.

The findings also establish that institutional strength and accountability mediate the relationship between populist mobilization and democratic representation. Strong legislatures, courts, electoral institutions, political parties, civil society and media can accommodate popular demands while constraining excessive concentration of political authority. Where institutional checks are weak, populist claims to exclusive representation may place greater pressure on pluralism and accountability. Populism should therefore be examined in relation to the institutional conditions within which it operates rather than assumed to have a uniform democratic consequence.

The comparative evidence from selected African contexts reinforces this institutional perspective. The Ghanaian experience associated with Jerry Rawlings illustrates the changing relationship between revolutionary populist politics and multiparty democracy (Haynes, 2023), while research on other African contexts demonstrates that anti-establishment mobilization can produce different institutional consequences (Resnick, 2019). These cases are relevant not because they represent a uniform African pattern, but because they demonstrate that the consequences of populist politics depend substantially on institutional arrangements, leadership practices and accountability mechanisms.

Taken together, the findings establish a clear analytical relationship between popular discontent, populist mobilization and democratic representation. Popular grievances can create opportunities for populist politics, but populism emerges when political actors construct those grievances through a people-versus-elite narrative. Anti-elite mobilization can increase political inclusion and institutional responsiveness, but it can also become

personalized and contribute to the concentration or reproduction of political power. The ultimate consequences therefore depend significantly on the capacity of representative institutions to mediate popular demands, maintain accountability and constrain political authority.

The study consequently demonstrates that the relationship between popular discontent and populist politics in Nigeria is neither automatic nor uniform. The critical process occurs through the political construction of grievances as a conflict between "the people" and "the elite." Whether this conflict produces greater responsiveness, political inclusion, institutional reform or institutional erosion depends on the strength of the representative and accountability institutions within which populist politics operates.

Conclusion

The study concludes that populism in Nigeria and selected African contexts is closely associated with perceived weaknesses in political representation, institutional responsiveness and dissatisfaction with established political elites. The findings demonstrate that economic hardship, unemployment, inequality, corruption, inadequate public services and limited political accountability can generate conditions of popular discontent. However, such grievances do not automatically produce populism. Rather, they become politically significant when political actors interpret and organize them through a people-versus-elite narrative, presenting themselves as defenders of ordinary citizens whose interests are perceived to have been neglected by established political actors.

The study further concludes that populist mobilization can perform a corrective representational function by bringing neglected grievances into political debate, increasing political participation and placing pressure on established elites and institutions to become more responsive. The Nigerian evidence also shows that dissatisfaction with political institutions does not necessarily mean rejection of democracy. Citizens may continue to support elections and political competition while expressing limited confidence in electoral institutions. This suggests that popular discontent may reflect demands for more accountable, transparent and responsive democratic institutions rather than opposition to democratic representation itself. However, the democratic consequences of populist mobilization are not uniform. Populist actors may challenge established elites while reproducing similar patterns of political concentration after gaining access to power. When leaders claim exclusive authority to speak for "the people," political pluralism, institutional accountability and opposition may come under pressure. The study therefore concludes that the significance of populism depends not only on its anti-elite character but also on how political power is exercised and constrained within democratic institutions.

The findings further demonstrate that institutional strength is a critical condition shaping

the relationship between populism and democratic representation. Strong legislatures, courts, electoral institutions, political parties, civil society and media can provide channels through which popular demands are accommodated while limiting excessive concentration of political power. The 2023 Nigerian electoral experience also demonstrates that legal and technological reforms, including the Electoral Act 2022, BVAS and IReV, cannot independently resolve deeper problems of institutional trust, electoral administration, insecurity and public confidence. Institutional reform must therefore be accompanied by broader improvements in accountability, transparency, responsiveness and institutional capacity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, African governments and democratic institutions should strengthen mechanisms of political accountability, responsiveness and citizen participation. The study demonstrates that persistent perceptions of political exclusion, weak representation and institutional unresponsiveness can create conditions in which populist actors transform public grievances into anti-establishment mobilization. Governments should therefore establish more effective channels through which citizens can communicate their concerns and participate in public decision-making. Regular public consultations, constituency engagement, accessible complaint mechanisms, transparent government communication and participatory policy processes can help reduce the distance between political institutions and citizens. Political accountability should also extend beyond elections through effective monitoring of public officials, transparent reporting of government activities and meaningful consequences for abuse of public office.

Political parties should strengthen their internal democratic structures and broaden participation in party decision-making. The findings indicate that excessive personalization of political leadership can contribute to the concentration of political authority and weaken representative institutions. Political parties should therefore promote transparent internal elections, democratic candidate selection, regular consultation with party members and greater inclusion of women, young people and marginalized groups in party structures. Parties should also develop clear mechanisms for receiving and incorporating citizens' concerns into policy platforms. Stronger internal party democracy can reduce the tendency for political parties to become centered around individual personalities and can strengthen their role as institutions through which citizens' interests are aggregated and represented.

Electoral management institutions should continue to improve the credibility, transparency, independence and administrative capacity of electoral processes. The findings from the 2023 Nigerian general election demonstrate that technological reforms such as BVAS and IReV can improve particular aspects of electoral administration but cannot, on their own, resolve broader problems of institutional trust and public

confidence. Electoral reforms should therefore be accompanied by adequate infrastructure, reliable electricity and communication systems, effective staff training, improved logistics, transparent results management and timely resolution of technical difficulties. Electoral management bodies should also strengthen public communication before, during and after elections so that citizens understand electoral procedures and the measures being taken to address identified weaknesses. These improvements can contribute to greater confidence in electoral institutions and reduce perceptions that elections are controlled by established political elites.

African legislatures should strengthen their representative, oversight and constituency-engagement functions. The findings suggest that perceptions of distance between citizens and political institutions can create opportunities for anti-establishment narratives. Legislatures should therefore establish more regular and meaningful engagement with constituents through public hearings, constituency consultations, town-hall meetings and other accessible mechanisms of interaction. Legislative committees should also strengthen oversight of executive actions, public expenditure and policy implementation. When citizens can observe that their concerns are considered within formal representative institutions, the perceived representational gap between citizens and political elites may be reduced.

The independence and effectiveness of courts, electoral management bodies, civil society organizations and the media should be protected and strengthened. The findings demonstrate that institutional checks are important in determining whether populist mobilization contributes to democratic responsiveness or to the concentration of political power. Courts should be able to perform their constitutional and accountability functions without undue political interference, while electoral institutions should maintain professional and administrative independence. Civil society organizations should be supported in monitoring government performance, promoting civic education and representing marginalized interests. Similarly, media institutions should be able to investigate public affairs and provide citizens with access to diverse political perspectives. Strong institutional pluralism provides important safeguards against excessive concentration of authority and helps maintain democratic accountability.

Governments should strengthen measures for protecting political pluralism and ensuring meaningful competition among political actors. The study finds that populist politics can become problematic when political leaders claim exclusive authority to speak for “the people” and portray political opponents or accountability institutions as illegitimate. Political competition should therefore be protected through equal application of electoral rules, respect for opposition parties and protection of citizens’ rights to organize, associate and express political opinions. Democratic institutions should ensure that political disagreement remains within legitimate constitutional and institutional channels. This would enable anti-establishment criticism to function as a form of democratic pressure without allowing political competition to undermine the institutions necessary

for democratic representation.

Governments should also address the socioeconomic conditions that contribute to persistent public dissatisfaction. The findings identify unemployment, inequality, corruption, inadequate public services and economic hardship as important conditions that can contribute to perceptions of political exclusion and elite failure. Governments should therefore prioritize employment creation, human capital development, equitable access to public services, social protection and effective anti-corruption measures. Particular attention should be given to young people and economically vulnerable populations who may experience political and socioeconomic exclusion more directly. Addressing these structural grievances will not eliminate populism, but it can reduce the accumulation of unresolved dissatisfaction that political actors may exploit through exclusionary or highly polarized political narratives.

Anti-corruption institutions should be strengthened to improve public confidence in government and reduce perceptions that political elites primarily serve private or sectional interests. The study identifies corruption as one of the important grievances that can contribute to anti-establishment sentiment. Anti-corruption measures should therefore be applied consistently and transparently, irrespective of political affiliation or status. Public procurement, government expenditure and the management of public resources should be subject to effective oversight and public scrutiny. Strengthening institutional mechanisms for detecting and addressing corruption can improve citizens' confidence in public institutions and reduce the perception that political power is primarily an avenue for elite enrichment.

Governments and electoral institutions should strengthen civic and democratic education. Citizens need greater awareness of the functions and limitations of political institutions, the importance of democratic accountability, the role of opposition parties and the significance of institutional checks and balances. Civic education should also help citizens distinguish legitimate criticism of political institutions from political narratives that seek to delegitimize democratic institutions altogether. An informed citizenry is better positioned to demand accountability while also protecting democratic institutions from manipulation by political actors who claim exclusive representation of "the people."

Political elites should recognize legitimate public grievances as an essential component of democratic politics rather than dismissing anti-establishment criticism as inherently destructive. The findings demonstrate that populist appeals often gain political relevance where citizens believe that conventional political institutions are not listening to them. Political leaders should therefore respond to legitimate grievances through policy engagement, dialogue and institutional reform. At the same time, political actors should avoid using popular dissatisfaction to undermine political pluralism, delegitimize opposition or weaken constitutional institutions. Constructive engagement with public grievances can transform political dissatisfaction into an opportunity for democratic improvement.

Finally, African democratic institutions should develop mechanisms for responding to emerging forms of populist mobilization without unnecessarily restricting legitimate political participation. Populist politics should not be treated solely as a threat because anti-establishment mobilization can sometimes draw attention to genuine failures of representation and accountability. The more appropriate institutional response is to address the grievances that give such mobilization political strength while maintaining constitutional safeguards and political pluralism. Strengthening responsiveness, accountability, inclusion and institutional checks can provide democratic channels through which citizens express dissatisfaction and demand political change. In this way, democratic systems can accommodate legitimate popular demands while limiting the possibility that political mobilization becomes a justification for excessive concentration of political authority.

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