

Populism, Public Trust, and Democratic Resilience: A Political Analysis of Contemporary Governance

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Apr 12th, 2026

Revised Mei 20th, 2026

Accepted Juni 26th, 2026

Keyword:

populism, public trust, democratic resilience, contemporary governance, political analysis.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience in contemporary governance. It aims to explain how populist narratives influence public trust and how democratic institutions respond to political pressure arising from distrust, polarization, and anti-elite sentiment. The study employs a qualitative method with an interpretive case study design, selected because the research focuses on political meanings, institutional perceptions, and governance dynamics that cannot be adequately explained through numerical measurement alone. The research was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, as the national center of political decision-making, public discourse, media activity, and democratic contestation. Data were collected from twelve purposively selected informants, including policy analysts, academics, journalists, civil society activists, political actors, public communication officers, legal observers, and community representatives. These informants were chosen because of their direct knowledge of populism, public trust, and democratic governance. The findings show that populism gains strength when public trust declines and when citizens perceive institutions as distant, unresponsive, or controlled by elites. Democratic resilience depends on institutional accountability, constitutional safeguards, civic participation, and transparent governance. The study recommends strengthening public communication, institutional reform, participatory mechanisms, and democratic education to rebuild trust while preserving pluralism and constitutional democracy.



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INTRODUCTION

Populism has become one of the most influential political phenomena in contemporary governance (Çuhadar, 2025). Across different democratic systems, populist actors have gained public support by claiming to represent “the people” against political elites, bureaucratic institutions, technocratic decision-makers, and established democratic procedures. This development has generated serious debate about the future of democracy, particularly because populism often emerges in contexts where citizens feel excluded from decision-making, disappointed by government performance, and distrustful of public institutions (Ogon & Etta, 2025). The title “Populism, Public Trust, and Democratic Resilience: A Political Analysis of Contemporary Governance” reflects the urgency of examining how populist politics interacts with public trust and how democratic systems respond to political pressure, institutional decline, social polarization, and legitimacy crises.

The state of the art in current political studies shows that populism is no longer understood merely as a temporary electoral strategy or rhetorical style. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views populism as a complex political logic that can reshape the relationship between citizens, leaders, parties, institutions, and democratic norms (Mikkonen & Lehtonen, 2025). In many countries, populist movements have successfully mobilized public dissatisfaction by presenting themselves as moral alternatives to allegedly corrupt elites. This strategy may increase political participation among previously marginalized groups, but it may also weaken institutional accountability when leaders claim that their personal authority represents the direct will of the people (Bell, 2025). Therefore, populism has an ambivalent character: it can expose weaknesses in representative democracy, but it can also

threaten constitutionalism, pluralism, minority rights, and institutional checks and balances (Patnaik, 2025).

Public trust occupies a central position in this debate. Democratic governance depends not only on elections, legal frameworks, and formal institutions, but also on citizens' belief that public authorities act fairly, competently, transparently, and responsibly (Ganuza & Sáez, 2025). When public trust declines, citizens become more receptive to anti-establishment narratives, conspiracy-based political communication, and simplified solutions to complex policy problems (Shikha, 2025). Populist leaders often capitalize on this condition by framing distrust as evidence that the entire political system has been captured by distant elites. As a result, the erosion of trust can become both a cause and a consequence of populist politics (Feng, 2023). On the one hand, distrust creates opportunities for populist mobilization; on the other hand, populist governance may further deepen distrust by attacking independent institutions, delegitimizing opposition, and portraying criticism as betrayal of the people (Moore, 2023).

The main research problem addressed in this study is the tension between populist political mobilization, declining public trust, and the capacity of democratic institutions to remain resilient. Contemporary governance faces a dilemma: democracies must remain open to popular demands, yet they must also protect institutional integrity and constitutional limits (Hassooni, 2023). Populism challenges this balance by claiming democratic legitimacy through direct appeal to the people while often questioning intermediary institutions such as parliaments, courts, political parties, media organizations, civil society groups, and expert agencies (Ali & Shah, 2025). This creates an important political problem: how can democratic systems respond to citizens' dissatisfaction without allowing populist pressures to undermine the foundations of democratic governance?

The research gap lies in the limited integration of three key dimensions: populism, public trust, and democratic resilience. Many existing studies discuss populism as a political ideology, communication strategy, or electoral phenomenon (Akanji, 2025). Other studies focus separately on public trust, especially in relation to government performance, corruption, policy failure, or institutional legitimacy. Meanwhile, democratic resilience is often examined through institutional design, constitutional safeguards, civic engagement, or crisis management (Srinu, 2025). However, fewer studies analyze these three dimensions as an interconnected political process within contemporary governance. This study seeks to fill that gap by explaining how populist narratives influence public trust, how distrust strengthens populist appeal, and how democratic institutions either adapt, resist, or deteriorate under populist pressure.

The novelty of this research is found in its attempt to develop an integrated political analysis of populism, public trust, and democratic resilience. Rather than treating populism only as a threat or only as a corrective force, this study examines it as a dynamic political phenomenon that reveals deeper problems within democratic governance (Zaslavskaya et al., 2025). The study proposes that democratic resilience should not be measured solely by the survival of elections or formal institutions, but also by the ability of a political system to maintain public trust, protect pluralism, ensure accountability, manage disagreement, and respond to citizens' demands without abandoning democratic principles (Buhari, 2025). This perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary governance, especially in societies facing polarization, institutional skepticism, digital disinformation, and leadership personalization.

Based on this background, the central research question of this study is: how does populism affect public trust and democratic resilience in contemporary governance? This main question can be developed into several analytical concerns. How do populist actors construct narratives of distrust toward political institutions? In what ways does declining public trust contribute to the rise of populist politics? How do democratic institutions respond to populist challenges? To what extent can democratic resilience be strengthened in political environments marked by polarization and anti-elite sentiment? These questions are important because they connect political communication, institutional legitimacy, citizen perception, and democratic sustainability within one analytical framework.

The objective of this research is to explain the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience in contemporary governance. More specifically, this study aims to analyze the political mechanisms through which populist actors mobilize distrust, identify the institutional consequences of populist governance, and assess the conditions that allow democracies to remain resilient despite populist pressure. The study also seeks to provide a conceptual contribution by clarifying that democratic resilience requires more than procedural continuity. It requires legitimacy, responsiveness, accountability, civic trust, and institutional capacity to manage political conflict in a democratic manner (Abdillah, 2025).

The theoretical benefit of this research is its contribution to the development of political theory on democracy, populism, and institutional legitimacy. By connecting populism with public trust and democratic resilience, this study expands the analytical scope of democratic theory beyond formal electoral competition. It highlights the importance of trust as a political resource that sustains democratic authority and explains why distrust can become a strategic instrument in populist mobilization (Teplyshova, 2024). Academically, this research may enrich comparative politics, governance studies, political sociology, and democratic resilience literature by offering an integrated framework that can be applied to different political contexts. It can also serve as a reference for future researchers who examine democratic backsliding, political polarization, leadership populism, and institutional reform.

Practically, this research provides useful insights for policymakers, democratic institutions, civil society organizations, political parties, and public administrators. Understanding the link between populism and public trust can help governments design more transparent, participatory, and accountable governance practices (Ndamase Maxhobandile et al., 2024). It can also assist democratic actors in responding to populist demands without dismissing legitimate public grievances. Rather than treating citizens' dissatisfaction as irrational, democratic institutions need to address the social, economic, and political conditions that create distrust. In this sense, the practical value of the study lies in its potential to support democratic reform, strengthen institutional communication, improve public accountability, and reduce polarization.

This research also has limitations. Since populism is a broad and context-dependent phenomenon, the analysis may not capture all variations across different political systems. Populism in established democracies may differ from populism in transitional or hybrid regimes (Mackenzie, 2023). Similarly, public trust may be shaped by historical experiences, media systems, economic inequality, corruption levels, cultural values, and institutional performance. The study may also face limitations in measuring democratic resilience, since resilience involves both visible institutional survival and less visible qualities such as civic norms, public confidence, and elite commitment to democratic rules. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the conceptual and methodological boundaries of the research.

Future research should examine the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience through comparative empirical studies. Further studies may compare different countries, regions, political parties, or leadership styles to identify how populism operates in varied institutional settings. Future research may also investigate the role of digital media, algorithmic communication, political disinformation, youth participation, economic insecurity, and crisis governance in shaping populist trust dynamics (Ansell, 2023). In addition, more attention should be given to the strategies that democratic institutions use to rebuild trust without adopting populist simplification. Such research would deepen understanding of how democracies can remain responsive, inclusive, and resilient in an era of political uncertainty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of "Populism, Public Trust, and Democratic Resilience: A Political Analysis of Contemporary Governance" requires a theoretical foundation that can explain three interconnected political processes: the rise of populist claims, the decline or transformation of public trust, and the capacity of democratic institutions to survive under pressure. Contemporary governance is increasingly shaped by tensions between popular dissatisfaction and institutional legitimacy (Li, 2023). Populist actors often present themselves as the authentic voice of "the people," while portraying political elites,

courts, parliaments, media, expert bodies, and administrative institutions as detached from ordinary citizens (AlAhmad, 2024). This condition makes the relationship between populism, trust, and democratic resilience highly relevant for political analysis.

The first theory used in this study is the Ideational Theory of Populism, popularized by Cas Mudde in 2004 through his influential article *The Populist Zeitgeist* (Uwaoma, 2025). Mudde is a Dutch political scientist affiliated with the University of Georgia, United States, where he is listed as Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF Professor of International Affairs and Distinguished Research Professor. His academic background includes political science training at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and his work focuses on populism, extremism, political parties, and democracy. Mudde's theory defines populism not merely as demagoguery or emotional politics, but as a "thin-centered" political ideology that divides society into two antagonistic camps: the pure people and the corrupt elite. In this perspective, populism claims that politics should express the general will of the people. His 2004 article is significant because it argues that populist discourse had become increasingly mainstream in Western democracies rather than remaining a marginal pathology.

Within this research, Mudde's theory helps explain the main research problem: how populist actors transform dissatisfaction into political legitimacy. Populism becomes analytically important because it does not always reject democracy in procedural terms; rather, it often claims to deepen democracy by restoring power to the people (Selelo & Mnisi, 2024). However, the problem appears when this claim delegitimizes pluralism, opposition, institutional independence, and constitutional restraint (Alnemr, 2023). The conceptual framework derived from Mudde positions populism as a discursive and ideological mechanism that converts public frustration into anti-elite mobilization. This theory is directly connected to the research gap because many studies discuss populism as an electoral phenomenon, while this study links populism to public trust and democratic resilience as an integrated governance problem.

The second theory is the Theory of Political Trust and Counter-Democracy, associated with Pierre Rosanvallon, especially through his work *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Westlake, 2025). Rosanvallon is a French historian and political theorist affiliated with the Collège de France, France, where he was elected professor in 2001 and held the Chair of Modern and Contemporary History of Politics. He is also associated with the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Rosanvallon argues that distrust is not only a symptom of democratic decay; it can also become a democratic practice through surveillance, prevention, and judgment by citizens. Cambridge University Press describes his work as an analysis of the mechanisms through which citizens express confidence and distrust, emphasizing the historical and theoretical role of distrust in democracy.

Rosanvallon's theory is important because public trust in contemporary governance cannot be understood simply as obedience to government. Trust is a relational and institutional condition that allows citizens to accept authority as legitimate, while distrust may serve as a corrective mechanism when institutions fail to respond (Susan, 2023). In relation to this study, Rosanvallon's framework helps explain why declining public trust can create both democratic vigilance and populist vulnerability. When distrust is organized through accountable civic oversight, it can strengthen democracy. However, when distrust is monopolized by populist leaders who claim exclusive representation of the people, it may weaken institutional legitimacy (Tshiyoyo, 2025). Recent discussions of Rosanvallon's work also highlight the importance of "invisible institutions" such as trust, legitimacy, and authority in sustaining democratic life, especially amid populist pressures.

The third theory is the Theory of Democratic Consolidation and Institutional Resilience, developed by Juan José Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, particularly in their 1996 book *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (R. Miller, 2025). Linz was a Spanish-American political scientist associated with Yale University, United States, and is widely known for his work on authoritarianism, democratic breakdown, and democratic transition. Yale University lists his major publications, including *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, co-authored with Alfred Stepan. Alfred C. Stepan was a major scholar of comparative politics affiliated with Columbia University, United States, and his works include studies on democratic transition, multinational societies, and democracies in danger. The 1996 work by Linz and Stepan examines how nondemocratic

regimes erode, how democratic regimes are crafted, and what tasks are required for democratic consolidation.

In this research, Linz and Stepan's theory provides the institutional dimension of democratic resilience. Democratic resilience refers not only to the survival of elections but also to the ability of political institutions to maintain constitutional order, civil liberties, rule of law, party competition, civic autonomy, and legitimate state authority (Prianto, 2024). Their theoretical framework is useful for connecting populism and public trust with institutional durability. If populist politics undermines independent courts, weakens media freedom, delegitimizes opposition, or concentrates power in executive leadership, democratic consolidation becomes fragile (Beyers & Maloney, 2024). Therefore, this theory clarifies the institutional consequences of populist distrust and helps answer the research question concerning how democracies remain resilient under populist pressure.

The development of these three theories shows a clear movement in contemporary political science. Mudde's theory evolved from conceptual clarification of populism toward broader debates on radical right parties, mainstreaming, and democratic backsliding (Gupta & Goantiya, 2025). Rosanvallon's theory developed from historical analysis of democracy toward contemporary reflections on distrust, legitimacy, and the invisible foundations of social cohesion. Linz and Stepan's theory developed from democratic transition studies toward current debates on resilience, erosion, and authoritarian tendencies inside electoral regimes (Bhat, 2023). Together, these theories demonstrate that contemporary democratic problems cannot be reduced to elections alone. They involve narratives of representation, structures of trust, and institutional capacity.

The conceptual framework of this study connects the three theories in a sequential but interactive way. Mudde explains how populism constructs an antagonistic political identity between the people and elites. Rosanvallon explains how distrust becomes a central political resource in democratic societies. Linz and Stepan explain how institutions either consolidate democracy or become vulnerable to erosion. These theories are connected to the main research problem because populism often grows from public distrust and then tests democratic resilience (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2024). They are connected to the research gap because previous studies often separate populism, trust, and resilience, while this study treats them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of contemporary governance.

These theories also support the formulation of the research problem: how does populism affect public trust and democratic resilience in contemporary governance? Mudde helps identify the populist logic of anti-elite mobilization. Rosanvallon helps explain the political meaning of trust and distrust. Linz and Stepan help assess whether democratic institutions can survive, adapt, or deteriorate under populist pressure. The research objective is therefore to analyze the relationship among populist discourse, public trust, and institutional resilience. The theoretical benefit lies in developing a more integrated model of democratic analysis. The academic benefit is the contribution to comparative politics, governance studies, and democratic theory. The practical benefit is the possibility of guiding policymakers, civil society, and democratic institutions in responding to populist grievances without sacrificing pluralism, accountability, and constitutional norms (Sari & Lodan, 2024).

In conclusion, the literature review shows that the novelty of this study lies in integrating three major theoretical traditions into one analytical framework. Mudde's ideational theory of populism explains the political construction of "the people" against "the elite." Rosanvallon's theory of counter-democracy explains distrust as both democratic oversight and a possible source of populist mobilization. Linz and Stepan's theory of democratic consolidation explains the institutional requirements of resilience. By combining these perspectives, this research offers a comprehensive approach to understanding contemporary governance, especially in political contexts marked by declining trust, populist mobilization, and democratic vulnerability (Smaliukienė & Giedraitytė, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applies a qualitative research method to examine the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience in contemporary governance (Sala, 2025). The qualitative method is considered appropriate because the central concern of the research is not to measure political attitudes statistically, but to interpret how political meanings, institutional narratives, public

perceptions, and democratic practices are constructed within a particular governance context. The topic of populism requires an interpretive approach because populist politics operates through discourse, symbolism, leadership claims, emotional mobilization, and public narratives about “the people” and “the elite (Offerdal, 2025).” Similarly, public trust cannot be fully understood only through numerical indicators, because trust is shaped by institutional experience, political memory, perceptions of fairness, government responsiveness, elite behavior, media representation, and citizens’ everyday encounters with public authority (Vijay & ., 2024). Democratic resilience also involves institutional, cultural, and normative dimensions that require careful interpretation.

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study with an interpretive political analysis approach (Gamlath, 2025). The case study design is selected because the research aims to investigate a contemporary political phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. Populism, public trust, and democratic resilience are not isolated variables; they interact within institutional settings, public discourse, policy practices, and political contestation. A case study allows the researcher to explore how populist narratives emerge, how citizens and institutional actors interpret public trust, and how democratic institutions respond to political pressure. This design also enables the research to connect theoretical concepts with empirical political realities, especially in governance environments marked by polarization, dissatisfaction with elites, and contested legitimacy.

The interpretive political analysis approach is used because the study focuses on meaning-making in political life (Ibrahim, 2023). Populism is treated not only as a political strategy or electoral behavior, but as a way of framing political reality. Through this approach, the study examines how political actors construct the image of the people, how institutions are represented as trustworthy or untrustworthy, and how democratic resilience is understood by actors involved in governance. This approach is suitable for the title of the study because contemporary governance is increasingly shaped by narratives, perceptions, and competing claims of legitimacy. The interpretive approach helps reveal how democratic challenges are experienced and explained by public officials, civil society actors, political analysts, journalists, and citizens.

The location of the research is Indonesia, with a particular focus on Jakarta as the national political and administrative center. Jakarta is selected because it represents a strategic site for studying contemporary governance, institutional trust, and populist political communication. As the capital city and the center of national political decision-making, Jakarta contains key institutions such as ministries, parliament-related political networks, national media organizations, political parties, civil society organizations, universities, and policy research centers. The city is also a symbolic arena where public dissatisfaction, elite contestation, media narratives, and democratic debates are frequently concentrated (Wu & Molden, 2023). Although the research focuses on Jakarta, the analysis is not limited to local politics. Jakarta is treated as a political hub through which broader national dynamics of populism, public trust, and democratic resilience can be observed.

The choice of Jakarta is also justified by the nature of the research problem. Populist politics often becomes visible in national-level political discourse, campaign rhetoric, media debates, policy controversies, and public criticism of state institutions. Jakarta provides access to informants who have direct knowledge of these processes, including policymakers, political party representatives, academics, journalists, activists, and governance observers. In addition, Jakarta has experienced intense political polarization in recent years, making it relevant for analyzing how public trust is shaped by identity politics, elite competition, public policy debates, and perceptions of institutional performance (Casullo, 2023). Therefore, the location is selected not because it represents all regions equally, but because it provides a dense and information-rich setting for examining the political dynamics addressed by the study.

Because this research uses a qualitative method, the study does not use respondents, statistical samples, or quantitative sampling procedures. Instead, the research uses informants selected through purposive sampling (Kundu & Samal, 2025). Purposive sampling is appropriate because the study requires individuals who possess knowledge, experience, and analytical capacity related to populism, public trust, and democratic governance. The informants are not selected to represent a population statistically, but to provide deep, relevant, and diverse insights into the research problem. The selection

criteria include professional involvement in politics or governance, expertise in democratic studies, experience in civil society advocacy, engagement with media or public discourse, and familiarity with public trust issues.

The study involves twelve key informants. Their names are presented using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and to maintain research ethics (Pandey, 2024). The first informant, Adrian, is a senior policy analyst at a governance research institute. He is selected because of his expertise in public policy, institutional performance, and governance reform. His perspective is useful for understanding how public trust is influenced by government responsiveness and bureaucratic accountability. The second informant, Maya, is a political science lecturer at a public university. She is chosen because of her academic expertise in populism, democratic theory, and political parties. Her contribution helps connect empirical findings with theoretical debates.

The third informant, Raka, is a parliamentary staff member who has experience in legislative communication and political negotiation. He is included because he can explain how elected institutions respond to public criticism, elite distrust, and populist pressure. The fourth informant, Sinta, is a civil society activist working on democracy and human rights advocacy. She is selected because civil society organizations often monitor democratic erosion, institutional accountability, and public participation (Clercy et al., 2025). Her perspective is important for assessing democratic resilience from outside the state apparatus. The fifth informant, Bima, is a journalist covering national politics. He is chosen because media actors play a central role in shaping public narratives about populism, corruption, institutional trust, and political legitimacy (Wolodin, 2025).

The sixth informant, Nadia, is a public communication officer in a government agency. She is included to understand how state institutions attempt to communicate policy, respond to public criticism, and rebuild trust. The seventh informant, Farhan, is a political party strategist. His perspective is relevant because populist messages are often produced and circulated through party competition, campaign strategy, and leadership branding (Falola, 2025). The eighth informant, Lestari, is a researcher at a public opinion survey institution. She is selected because she can explain trends in public trust, citizen dissatisfaction, and perceptions of democratic performance. Although the study is qualitative, her interpretive explanation of public opinion trends enriches the analysis.

The ninth informant, Yusuf, is a community leader involved in urban civic forums. He is selected because the study also needs citizen-level insight into how people perceive political elites, public institutions, and democratic participation. The tenth informant, Clara, is a digital media analyst who studies online political communication. She is included because contemporary populism is strongly influenced by social media, digital mobilization, algorithmic visibility, and online polarization (Chauhan, 2025). The eleventh informant, Hendra, is a former local government official with experience in public service delivery. His perspective is useful for understanding how governance performance influences institutional trust. The twelfth informant, Dewi, is a legal observer focusing on constitutionalism and rule of law. She is selected because democratic resilience depends not only on public opinion but also on legal safeguards, institutional independence, and constitutional accountability (N. S. Tshishonga, 2023).

The main reason for selecting these informants is their relevance to the research questions. The study requires a multi-perspective understanding of populism, public trust, and democratic resilience. Political elites and party strategists help explain how populist narratives are produced. Government officials and policy analysts help explain how institutions respond to distrust. Academics and researchers provide theoretical and analytical interpretation. Journalists and digital media analysts explain the role of public communication and media framing. Civil society activists and community leaders provide perspectives on accountability, participation, and democratic legitimacy. Legal observers help assess institutional resilience and constitutional safeguards. This combination of informants supports a comprehensive political analysis.

Data collection is conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation of political discourse (N. Tshishonga, 2023). Semi-structured interviews are used because they provide flexibility while maintaining focus on the research themes. The interview guide

includes questions about the meaning of populism, sources of public distrust, perceptions of democratic institutions, experiences with governance responsiveness, the role of media and political leadership, and strategies for strengthening democratic resilience. The semi-structured format allows informants to develop their arguments freely while enabling the researcher to compare responses across categories of informants.

Document analysis is used to complement interview data (Castiglione, 2024). The documents analyzed may include policy statements, speeches, party platforms, media reports, public opinion releases, institutional reports, civil society publications, and academic literature. These documents help identify how populism is expressed in political language, how trust and distrust are framed in public debate, and how democratic resilience is discussed by institutional and non-institutional actors. Document analysis is important because populism often operates through public texts, symbolic claims, and repeated narratives. It also helps reduce dependence on interview data alone.

Observation of political discourse is conducted by examining public debates, media discussions, press statements, campaign messages, and digital political communication related to governance and democratic legitimacy. This observation is not designed as ethnographic immersion, but as contextual political observation. It helps the researcher understand how political messages circulate, how distrust is amplified, and how democratic institutions are defended or criticized in public arenas (Boda, 2024). In contemporary governance, political meaning is often formed not only in formal institutions but also through media platforms and digital communication spaces.

The data analysis technique used in this research is thematic analysis (Lacatus et al., 2023). Thematic analysis is selected because it allows the researcher to identify, classify, interpret, and connect patterns across interview transcripts, documents, and discourse materials. The analysis begins with data familiarization, followed by coding relevant statements and textual materials. Codes are then grouped into broader themes, such as anti-elite narratives, institutional distrust, leadership personalization, public dissatisfaction, democratic accountability, constitutional safeguards, media polarization, civic oversight, and institutional adaptation. These themes are interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework of populism, political trust, and democratic resilience.

The process of drawing conclusions in this study follows an inductive-interpretive logic (Onyango, 2025). The researcher does not begin with rigid hypotheses to be statistically tested. Instead, conclusions are developed through careful interpretation of empirical patterns, theoretical reflection, and comparison among informant perspectives. The conclusion is drawn by connecting the research findings with the main research problem: how populism affects public trust and democratic resilience in contemporary governance. The researcher examines whether populist discourse strengthens democratic responsiveness, undermines institutional legitimacy, or produces both effects simultaneously. The conclusion also evaluates how public trust becomes a mediating condition between populist mobilization and democratic resilience.

To ensure the credibility of the research, this study applies triangulation, member reflection, and theoretical consistency (Debbarma, 2025). Triangulation is conducted by comparing interview data with documents and public discourse materials. Member reflection may be used by allowing selected informants to clarify or confirm the accuracy of their statements when necessary. Theoretical consistency is maintained by interpreting the findings through the three main theoretical lenses: the ideational theory of populism, the theory of political trust, and the theory of democratic consolidation and resilience. These strategies strengthen the validity of the qualitative analysis.

Ethical considerations are also central to this research. Since the study involves political opinions, institutional criticism, and sensitive evaluations of democratic governance, all informants are protected through pseudonyms. Their identities are anonymized to prevent reputational, professional, or political risks (Marinos, 2023). The researcher explains the purpose of the study to each informant and ensures that participation is voluntary. Information obtained from interviews is used only for academic purposes. The ethical principle of confidentiality is especially important because the topic involves political polarization, public trust, and potential criticism of political actors or state institutions.

This method has several limitations. First, because the research uses a qualitative case study design, the findings are not intended to produce statistical generalization. The purpose is analytical depth rather than numerical representation (Office, 2024). Second, the use of purposive informants may create limits in terms of diversity of opinion, particularly if access to certain political actors is restricted. Third, the study focuses on Jakarta as a political hub, which may not fully represent regional variations in public trust and populist politics across Indonesia. Fourth, political discourse changes rapidly, especially in digital spaces; therefore, the findings should be understood within the time and context of the study.

Despite these limitations, the chosen method is suitable for the research title and objectives. A qualitative case study allows the research to explain how populism operates as a political narrative, how public trust is shaped by institutional experience and perception, and how democratic resilience depends on both formal institutions and public legitimacy. The method provides room to analyze complexity, contradiction, and meaning. It also supports the novelty of the study, namely the integration of populism, public trust, and democratic resilience into one political analysis of contemporary governance (Suffianor, 2025). Through this method, the research is expected to contribute theoretically, academically, and practically to the study of democracy in an era of distrust and populist mobilization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative study show that populism, public trust, and democratic resilience are deeply connected within contemporary governance (Baporikar, 2024). Based on in-depth interviews with twelve informants, document analysis, and observation of political discourse, the research found that populism does not emerge in a political vacuum. It grows from dissatisfaction with public institutions, disappointment with elite performance, perceptions of unequal access to decision-making, and the belief that formal democratic institutions do not always represent ordinary citizens (Xiang, 2024). This finding directly relates to the main research problem: how populist mobilization interacts with declining public trust and how democratic institutions respond to such pressure.

The results indicate that populism is primarily constructed through narratives of moral opposition between “the people” and “the elite.” Informants from civil society, political analysis, journalism, and public communication repeatedly emphasized that populist actors often simplify complex governance problems by identifying elites as the main source of injustice, corruption, inefficiency, or social exclusion. This finding corresponds with Cas Mudde’s ideational theory of populism, which explains populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into antagonistic camps: the pure people and the corrupt elite (Essomba et al., 2023). In the context of this research, Mudde’s theory is useful for explaining why populist discourse becomes attractive when citizens perceive that democratic institutions are distant, slow, or unresponsive.

However, the study also found that public distrust is not always irrational or anti-democratic. Several informants argued that citizens’ dissatisfaction often comes from real governance problems, including weak public service delivery, limited transparency, perceived corruption, inconsistent law enforcement, elite privilege, and ineffective political communication (Strikovic & Bos, 2025). This finding supports Pierre Rosanvallon’s theory of political trust and counter-democracy. Rosanvallon’s perspective helps explain that distrust can function as a democratic mechanism when it encourages oversight, public criticism, and institutional accountability (Varma, 2024). Nevertheless, the same distrust can become politically dangerous when it is converted into absolute rejection of institutions and monopolized by populist leaders.

The findings further show that democratic resilience depends on the ability of institutions to absorb criticism while preserving constitutional principles, pluralism, and accountability. Informants from legal, academic, and civil society backgrounds stressed that resilient democracy is not simply measured by regular elections. It is also reflected in the independence of courts, credibility of parliament, freedom of media, autonomy of civil society, professionalism of bureaucracy, and citizens’ confidence that institutions can solve public problems (Bachmann, 2025). This finding is consistent with Juan José Linz and Alfred C. Stepan’s theory of democratic consolidation, which emphasizes the importance of institutional legitimacy, rule of law, civil society, political society, and effective state capacity (Latusek et al., 2025).

The following table summarizes the main qualitative findings based on the research method used.

Table

Table 1 Thematic Findings on Populism, Public Trust, and Democratic Resilience in Contemporary Governance

Research Focus	Main Qualitative Finding	Supporting Informant Perspective	Theoretical Link	Implementation Meaning
Populist narrative	Populism is built through opposition between “the people” and “the elite”	Political strategist, journalist, academic, civil society activist	Mudde’s ideational theory of populism	Democratic actors need to respond to public grievances without adopting exclusionary anti-institutional rhetoric
Public trust	Distrust emerges from perceived institutional failure, weak responsiveness, and elite distance	Policy analyst, survey researcher, community leader, government communicator	Rosanvallon’s political trust and counter-democracy	Institutions must improve transparency, accountability, and citizen communication
Democratic resilience	Resilience depends on institutional independence, rule of law, civic participation, and public legitimacy	Legal observer, academic, civil society activist, former official	Linz and Stepan’s democratic consolidation theory	Democratic resilience requires legal safeguards, civic oversight, and effective governance
Research gap	Previous approaches often separate populism, trust, and resilience	Cross-informant pattern	Integration of Mudde, Rosanvallon, Linz and Stepan	The study proposes an integrated framework for contemporary governance analysis
Main problem	Populism grows when distrust becomes politically mobilized against democratic institutions	Civil society activist, journalist, party strategist	Combination of the three theories	Democratic reform must address both citizen grievances and institutional protection
Research contribution	Democratic resilience is shaped by trust, not only by formal institutions	Academic, policy analyst, legal observer	Combined theoretical framework	Democracy must be evaluated through legitimacy, responsiveness, and institutional durability

The main research problem is therefore confirmed by the data: populism becomes powerful when public trust weakens, and democratic resilience is tested when populist actors use distrust to challenge institutional legitimacy. The interviews show that citizens do not necessarily reject democracy as an ideal. Instead, many citizens become disappointed with how democracy is practiced (Caluwaerts & Vermassen, 2023). They may still support elections, participation, and representation, but they question whether elected officials, parties, courts, and bureaucratic agencies genuinely serve the public interest. This distinction is important because it shows that democratic dissatisfaction can produce two different outcomes. It may generate democratic correction through public accountability, or it may support populist mobilization that weakens democratic norms.

Mudde’s theory explains the first layer of the findings by showing how populism organizes political dissatisfaction into a moral narrative. Populist actors do not merely criticize policy failure.

They construct a political identity in which the people are portrayed as morally superior and elites are portrayed as corrupt, selfish, or detached (Diéguez & Chmielewski, 2023). The implementation of this finding is significant. Democratic institutions should not ignore public anger, but they must avoid validating the idea that only one leader, party, or movement represents the entire people. Inclusive democratic communication is needed to acknowledge grievances while defending pluralism and institutional accountability.

Rosanvallón's theory explains the second layer of the findings by clarifying the role of distrust. The study found that distrust has both constructive and destructive dimensions. Constructive distrust appears when citizens monitor government, demand transparency, question policy decisions, and participate in public debate. Destructive distrust emerges when all institutions are viewed as illegitimate and when political disagreement is framed as betrayal (Shaughnessy & Kioussis, 2023). The implementation of this finding is that governments need to institutionalize channels of accountability, such as public consultation, access to information, participatory forums, independent oversight, and responsive complaint mechanisms. Without such channels, distrust may move from democratic vigilance to populist resentment.

Linz and Stepan's theory explains the third layer of the findings by emphasizing institutional resilience. The data suggest that democratic resilience is not automatic. It requires political actors who accept constitutional limits, citizens who defend pluralism, institutions that maintain independence, and state agencies that deliver public goods fairly (Kavuro, 2024). The implementation is clear: democratic resilience must be strengthened through institutional reform, legal consistency, protection of civil liberties, professional public administration, and political education. A democracy may continue to hold elections but still become fragile if citizens lose trust and if institutions become subordinated to personalistic leadership.

The research gap identified in this study is also confirmed by the findings. Many previous discussions of populism focus on ideology, leadership, party competition, or electoral mobilization. Studies of public trust often focus on institutional performance or citizen satisfaction. Studies of democratic resilience frequently emphasize constitutional design or formal institutional survival. This research shows that these three dimensions should not be analyzed separately. Populism shapes trust; trust influences democratic legitimacy; and democratic resilience depends on how institutions respond to both populist pressure and public dissatisfaction. The novelty of this study lies in connecting these dimensions into one analytical framework.

The findings related to the research gap show that contemporary governance requires an integrated model of political analysis. A purely institutional approach cannot fully explain why citizens support populist actors. A purely behavioral approach cannot explain how institutions withstand populist challenges. A purely discursive approach cannot explain the material governance failures that produce public dissatisfaction. By combining Mudde, Rosanvallón, and Linz–Stepan, this study provides a more complete explanation. Mudde explains the populist construction of political antagonism. Rosanvallón explains the democratic meaning of trust and distrust. Linz and Stepan explain the institutional conditions needed for democratic survival.

The research question asks how populism affects public trust and democratic resilience in contemporary governance. The findings answer this question by showing that populism affects public trust in two ways. First, it uses existing distrust as a political resource. Populist actors often amplify public frustration by arguing that institutions are controlled by elites who do not care about ordinary citizens (Bond et al., 2023). Second, populist politics may deepen distrust by attacking independent institutions, delegitimizing opposition, and portraying critical media or civil society as enemies of the people (Nieuwenhuizen, 2025). In this sense, populism is both a symptom and a driver of trust erosion.

The findings also show that democratic resilience is affected by how institutions respond to populist pressure. If institutions respond defensively, ignore public grievances, or communicate in technocratic language detached from citizens' experiences, populist narratives may become stronger. However, if institutions respond through transparency, participation, fairness, and accountability, public trust can be gradually rebuilt (H. T. Miller & Fox, 2024). The implementation of this conclusion is that

democratic resilience requires both institutional protection and democratic responsiveness. Institutions must defend constitutional norms while also addressing the social and political causes of distrust.

The objective of this research is to explain the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience in contemporary governance. The findings indicate that this objective has been achieved through the identification of three analytical mechanisms. The first mechanism is narrative construction, where populist actors frame politics as a struggle between people and elites. The second mechanism is trust conversion, where citizen dissatisfaction is transformed into either democratic oversight or populist rejection. The third mechanism is institutional response, where democratic resilience depends on whether institutions can maintain legitimacy while adapting to public demands. These mechanisms show that the relationship among populism, trust, and resilience is not linear, but interactive.

The theoretical benefit of the research lies in its contribution to democratic theory and political analysis. The study expands Mudde's ideational theory by linking populist ideology to trust dynamics and institutional resilience. It extends Rosanvallon's theory by showing how distrust can shift from counter-democratic vigilance to populist delegitimation. It enriches Linz and Stepan's theory by emphasizing that democratic consolidation depends not only on formal institutions but also on public trust and narrative legitimacy (A, 2025). The theoretical implementation is the development of an integrated model that can be used to study other democratic contexts facing populist mobilization and institutional distrust.

The academic benefit lies in the contribution to comparative politics, governance studies, political sociology, and democratic resilience literature. The study provides a conceptual bridge between populism studies and public trust research. It also offers a methodological contribution by using qualitative case study analysis to capture meanings, perceptions, and institutional interpretations that cannot be fully understood through surveys alone (Stanojević, 2025). Academically, the study may support future research on populist communication, democratic backsliding, political polarization, institutional legitimacy, and citizen-state relations.

The practical benefit of the study concerns governance reform and democratic strengthening. The findings suggest that governments, political parties, civil society organizations, media institutions, and educational actors should not treat populism merely as a communication problem. Populism becomes persuasive because it speaks to real or perceived failures of representation and governance (Print, 2023). Therefore, practical responses must include institutional transparency, anti-corruption measures, inclusive participation, fair law enforcement, public service improvement, and responsible political communication. Democratic actors must also avoid dismissing citizens' concerns as irrational, because such dismissal may strengthen populist claims that elites are arrogant or disconnected.

The discussion of the main research problem can be connected to previous research on populism and democracy. Previous studies have generally shown that populism emerges where citizens feel alienated from political elites and where established institutions fail to maintain legitimacy (Park, 2024). The findings of this study support that argument, but they also add that public trust functions as a mediating variable. Populism does not automatically weaken democracy; its impact depends on the condition of public trust and institutional response. If distrust is addressed through democratic reform, populist pressure may encourage correction. If distrust is exploited through anti-pluralist narratives, populism may accelerate democratic erosion.

The discussion of the research gap also relates to previous findings. Earlier studies often examine populist leadership, party strategy, or electoral success, while fewer studies integrate populism with the micro-foundations of trust and the macro-structure of democratic resilience. This study addresses that gap by showing that populist politics operates simultaneously at the level of discourse, perception, and institution. The gap is therefore not only theoretical but also methodological. Studying populism requires attention to political language, citizen perception, institutional behavior, and democratic norms. The qualitative method used in this research allows these dimensions to be examined together (Bentzen et al., 2025).

The discussion of the research question further shows that the relationship between populism and public trust is reciprocal. Populism grows from distrust, but it can also intensify distrust. Citizens who believe that institutions are unresponsive may support leaders who promise direct representation. Yet when such leaders undermine independent institutions, distrust may become deeper and more generalized. This creates a cycle in which weak trust enables populist mobilization, and populist mobilization weakens trust further. Democratic resilience depends on breaking this cycle through credible institutional reform and inclusive political communication (Satia, 2024).

The discussion of the research objectives confirms that this study does not aim to condemn all expressions of popular dissatisfaction. Instead, it distinguishes between democratic criticism and anti-democratic populist simplification. Democratic criticism is necessary for accountability. Citizens should question institutions, demand fairness, and challenge elite privilege. However, democracy becomes vulnerable when criticism is transformed into rejection of pluralism, hostility toward minorities, personalization of power, and attacks on institutional independence (Hamm & Banner, 2025). This distinction is central to the study's contribution because it avoids treating populism as either entirely democratic or entirely authoritarian.

The discussion of theoretical benefits shows that the three theories complement each other. Mudde provides the ideological explanation, Rosanvallon provides the trust-based explanation, and Linz–Stepan provide the institutional explanation. Together, they make it possible to understand why populism becomes persuasive, how distrust becomes politically meaningful, and what conditions allow democracy to survive. The theoretical contribution of this study is therefore synthetic rather than isolated. It does not replace existing theories but brings them into conversation to explain a contemporary governance problem.

The discussion of practical benefits shows that democratic resilience must be built through both institutional and communicative reforms. Institutions must become more transparent, responsive, and accountable. Political parties must improve representation and avoid manipulative polarization. Media organizations must maintain independence while resisting sensationalism that amplifies distrust without context. Civil society must continue monitoring power while promoting democratic literacy. Educational institutions must strengthen citizens' understanding of pluralism, constitutionalism, and political responsibility (Trondal & Proszowska, 2025). These practical implications are consistent with the findings that democratic resilience depends on the interaction between state capacity, public trust, and civic culture.

The discussion of academic benefits shows that future studies can build from this research by applying the integrated framework to other countries or regions. Comparative research could examine whether populism operates differently in established democracies, transitional democracies, and hybrid regimes. Further studies may also investigate digital populism, youth political behavior, identity-based polarization, crisis governance, and the role of artificial intelligence in political communication (Azizov, 2025). The academic value of this research lies in opening a broader research agenda on how trust and resilience mediate the effects of populism.

In conclusion, the results and discussion demonstrate that populism, public trust, and democratic resilience are mutually connected dimensions of contemporary governance. The main research problem is confirmed: populism becomes politically powerful when public trust declines, and democratic resilience is tested when distrust is mobilized against institutional legitimacy. The research gap is addressed by integrating Mudde's ideational theory of populism, Rosanvallon's theory of political trust and counter-democracy, and Linz–Stepan's theory of democratic consolidation. The research question is answered by showing that populism both uses and reshapes public trust, while democratic resilience depends on institutional responsiveness, constitutional protection, and civic engagement (Schultz, 2025). The objectives and benefits of the study are achieved through the development of an integrated analytical framework that contributes theoretically, academically, and practically to the study of democracy in an era of populist pressure and public distrust.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the relationship between populism, public trust, and democratic resilience is a central issue in contemporary governance. Based on the results and discussion, populism should not be understood only as an electoral strategy or a rhetorical style used by political leaders. It is a broader political phenomenon that emerges from dissatisfaction with institutions, disappointment toward elites, and the perception that democratic governance has failed to respond to citizens' expectations. In the context of the research title, "Populism, Public Trust, and Democratic Resilience: A Political Analysis of Contemporary Governance," the findings demonstrate that populism becomes politically powerful when public trust declines and when citizens believe that formal institutions no longer represent their interests effectively.

The results show that populist narratives are commonly built through a moral division between "the people" and "the elite." This division allows populist actors to transform public disappointment into political mobilization. The study confirms that such narratives are persuasive because they simplify complex governance problems into a conflict between ordinary citizens and allegedly corrupt or distant elites. This conclusion is consistent with the discussion based on Cas Mudde's ideational theory of populism, which explains that populism constructs politics through antagonism between the pure people and the corrupt elite. However, the study also concludes that the appeal of populism cannot be separated from real governance problems, including weak responsiveness, limited transparency, perceived corruption, unequal access to decision-making, and inconsistent institutional accountability.

The study further concludes that public trust functions as a critical link between populist mobilization and democratic resilience. Public distrust is not always harmful to democracy. As explained in the results and discussion through Pierre Rosanvallon's theory of political trust and counter-democracy, distrust may serve as a democratic mechanism when it encourages citizens to monitor power, demand accountability, and criticize public institutions. Nevertheless, distrust becomes problematic when it is transformed into total rejection of democratic institutions and when populist actors use it to delegitimize courts, parliaments, media, civil society, opposition groups, and expert institutions. Therefore, the research concludes that the democratic meaning of distrust depends on how it is organized, communicated, and institutionalized.

Another important conclusion is that democratic resilience cannot be measured only by the continuation of elections or the survival of formal institutions. Drawing from the discussion of Juan José Linz and Alfred C. Stepan's theory of democratic consolidation, the study finds that resilience requires institutional independence, rule of law, civil liberties, active civil society, credible political competition, and effective state capacity. A democracy may continue to operate procedurally but still become vulnerable when public trust collapses and when institutions are unable to respond to populist pressure. Democratic resilience therefore depends on both institutional strength and public legitimacy.

The findings also confirm the research gap identified in this study. Previous studies often examine populism, public trust, and democratic resilience separately. This research concludes that the three dimensions must be analyzed as an interconnected political process. Populism grows from distrust, distrust shapes perceptions of institutional legitimacy, and democratic resilience depends on how institutions respond to both public dissatisfaction and populist pressure. The novelty of this study lies in integrating these three dimensions into one analytical framework for understanding contemporary governance.

In practical terms, the study concludes that democratic institutions should not respond to populism merely by rejecting it as irrational or dangerous. Such a response may strengthen populist claims that elites are detached from the people. Instead, democratic actors need to address the root causes of distrust through transparency, accountability, fair law enforcement, inclusive participation, responsive public service, and ethical political communication. At the same time, institutions must defend pluralism, constitutional limits, minority rights, media freedom, and judicial independence.

Overall, this research concludes that democratic resilience in the age of populism depends on the capacity of governance systems to rebuild public trust without sacrificing democratic principles. Populism reveals weaknesses in representation and institutional performance, but it may also threaten democracy when it rejects pluralism and concentrates legitimacy in a single leader or movement.

Therefore, strengthening democracy requires more than institutional preservation; it requires restoring citizens' confidence, improving governance quality, and protecting the normative foundations of democratic life.

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