LEADER CULT, CHARISMA, AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: CONTEMPORARY POPULISM FROM A WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study explores the rise of populist leadership forms since the 2000s by drawing on Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Through the cases of Donald Trump (USA), Narendra Modi (India), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), it examines how charismatic authority is reconstructed in contemporary politics, how populism reinforces this authority type, and how charisma-based claims to legitimacy interact with democratic institutions. The study employs discourse analysis and comparative case study methods, focusing on political rhetoric and practices. The literature review is grounded in recent international scholarship on Weberian authority types, charismatic leadership, populism, and crises of political representation.

Findings suggest that today's populist leaders reconstruct charismatic authority through personalized narratives, symbols, and image strategies. Populist discourse built on the antagonism between "the people" and "the elites" strengthens their claims to legitimacy. While charisma-based legitimacy aligns with a majoritarian understanding of democracy, it structurally conflicts with liberal democratic norms such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and institutional oversight.

The study argues that populist charismatic leadership is shaped not only by individual traits but also by systemic crises in political representation. This leadership style fosters direct mobilization while weakening democratic institutions and encouraging authoritarian tendencies.

In conclusion, Weber's century-old concept of charismatic authority provides a powerful lens to understand contemporary populist leadership. However, in the digital era, where media technologies and ideological populism converge, this form of authority poses serious challenges to liberal democracies.

Keywords: Authority, Populist Leadership, Political Legitimacy, Max Weber, Crisis of Representation.

Lider Kültü, Karizma ve Siyasal Meşruiyet: Weberyen Perspektiften Günümüz Popülizmi

Öz

Bu çalışma, Max Weber'in karizmatik otorite kavramına dayanarak, 2000 sonrası dönemde yükselen popülist liderlik biçimlerini incelemektedir. Donald Trump (ABD), Narendra Modi (Hindistan) ve Jair Bolsonaro (Brezilya) örnekleri üzerinden, çağdaş siyaset sahnesinde karizmatik otoritenin nasıl yeniden inşa edildiği, popülizmin bu otorite biçimini nasıl güçlendirdiği ve karizma temelli meşruiyet iddialarının demokratik kurumlarla nasıl ilişkilendiği ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, söylem analizi ve karşılaştırmalı vaka yöntemiyle, liderlerin siyasal söylemleri ve pratiklerine odaklanmaktadır. Literatür taraması, Weberyen otorite tipolojileri, karizmatik liderlik, popülizm ve siyasal temsil krizine dair güncel uluslararası akademik kaynaklara dayanmaktadır.

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Leader Cult, Charisma, And Political Legitimacy: Contemporary Populism From A Weberian perspective.

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Bulgular, günümüz popülist liderlerinin karizmatik otoriteyi kişiselleştirilmiş anlatılar, semboller ve imaj stratejileriyle yeniden inşa ettiğini göstermektedir. "Halk" ile "seçkinler" karşıtlığına dayalı popülist söylemler, meşruiyet iddialarını güçlendirmektedir. Karizma temelli meşruiyet, çoğunlukçu bir demokrasi anlayışıyla örtüşürken; hukuk devleti, kuvvetler ayrılığı ve kurumsal denetim gibi liberal normlarla yapısal bir gerilim içerisindedir.

Sonuç olarak, Weber'in bir yüzyıl önce ortaya koyduğu karizmatik otorite kavramı günümüz liderliğini anlamada güçlü bir çerçeve sunmaktadır; ancak dijital çağın medya teknolojileri ve ideolojik popülizmiyle birleştiğinde, liberal demokrasilere ciddi meydan okumalar getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karizmatik Otorite, Popülist Liderlik, Siyasal Meşruiyet, Max Weber, Temsil Krizi.

Introduction

In political science literature, populist leadership has emerged as a prominent form of leadership—particularly since the 2000s—characterized by its challenge to established political norms across various democratic contexts. The central feature of this leadership style is the glorification of the leader as an "extraordinary" figure in the eyes of the masses, gaining legitimacy through populist narratives that frame society in binary terms—casting themselves as the voice of "the people" against an entrenched elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2019). In this context, Max Weber's classical typology of authority, particularly the concept of charismatic authority, provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding these new political actors.

Weber (1978) classifies authority into three "ideal types": traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Charismatic authority arises from the belief of followers that the leader possesses exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary qualities. Its legitimacy does not derive from ancient traditions or rational-legal norms but directly from the personal attributes of the leader. The charismatic leader mobilizes followers with an appeal that transcends existing institutional structures and rational authority forms (Moffitt, 2016). Combined with populist discourse, charismatic authority fosters a political style that emphasizes the direct will of the people over institutional representation.

In this regard, contemporary leaders such as Donald Trump (USA), Narendra Modi (India), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) stand out as figures who exemplify Weberian charismatic authority. After his election in 2016, Trump cultivated a charisma-based political culture rooted in personal loyalty and mass support. Modi, meanwhile, has sustained his long-term rule in India through an ideological framework known as "Moditva," blending Hindu nationalism with the tools of digital political communication to construct a dual image of himself as both "divine" and a "humble man of the people" (Rai, 2023). Bolsonaro has been dubbed "the Trump of the Tropics," emerging as a charismatic figure in Brazil by portraying himself as an "honest," "tough," and "messianic" leader standing against elites associated with corruption (Rivera, 2024).

This article aims to analyze and compare the legitimacy strategies and populist discourses of these three leaders, grounded in charismatic authority. It addresses three main research questions: (1) How is charismatic authority reconstructed under current political and communicative conditions? (2) How do populist strategies and discourses sustain the continuity of charismatic legitimacy? (3) What forms of interaction and tension exist between charisma-based leadership and democratic institutions? These questions are of theoretical and empirical significance in understanding the ongoing crises in representative democracy and the global shift toward leader-centric politics.

The study employs discourse analysis and comparative case study methodology. The selection of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro is based on their similar populist-charismatic leadership styles, despite their distinct historical and cultural settings. This comparative approach allows for the identification of both case-specific dynamics and structural commonalities. The article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews Weberian authority theory and the contemporary literature on populism; the methodology section explains the discourse-analytical comparative approach; the analysis section

explores the three leaders thematically; the discussion section connects the findings to the theoretical framework; and finally, the conclusion offers general reflections and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Max Weber's typology of authority is widely regarded as one of the foundational pillars of modern political sociology. Weber (1978) defines charismatic authority as grounded in "devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person and the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him." This type of authority represents a revolutionary form of legitimacy wherein followers bypass legal or traditional norms in their loyalty to the leader. The charismatic leader derives legitimacy not from formal procedures or ancient customs but from personal appeal and extraordinary attributes (Gerth & Mills, 1991; Eisenstadt, 1968).

According to Weber, charismatic authority typically arises during periods of crisis, uncertainty, and social dislocation, and it carries a transformative potential (Bendix, 1977). However, by nature, charisma is unstable. Over time, it tends to become institutionalized—a process Weber (1978) refers to as the "routinization of charisma"—transforming into legal-rational or traditional authority. As seen in historical examples, religious leadership that initially emerges as charismatic often becomes bureaucratized in subsequent generations through institutions such as the Church or the Islamic ulema (Eisenstadt, 1968; Collins, 1986). Weber's analysis thus provides a critical insight into the temporary force of charisma and its eventual domestication by systemic structures.

Weber's concept of charismatic authority has been reinterpreted in recent decades within the context of populism and political leadership, particularly as it relates to contemporary developments (Moffitt, 2016; Weyland, 2013). The literature on populism has increasingly focused on its reliance on moral dualism—opposing a virtuous populace to a corrupt elite. Mudde (2004) famously defined populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two morally homogeneous and antagonistic groups—the virtuous people and the corrupt elite—and asserts that politics should reflect the general will of the people. Within this discourse, "the people" are portrayed as carriers of collective virtue, while "the elites" represent a threat to popular sovereignty. This dichotomy enables populist leaders to present themselves as the sole and authentic representatives of the people (Müller, 2016; Gagnon et al., 2018).

Populist leaders frame legitimacy through a Manichean narrative, contrasting "us" with "them" —be it elites, immigrants, or political adversaries (Laclau, 2005). In this context, charismatic leadership functions as a key operational mechanism of populism. The populist leader claims direct representation, circumventing institutional intermediaries and frequently reinforcing this claim through a charismatic posture (Pappas, 2019).

Numerous studies highlight that modern populist movements are highly personalized and leader-centered, often organized around strong charismatic figures (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Urbinati, 2019; Abts & Rummens, 2007). For example, Pappas (2019), in his analysis of European cases, notes that many populist parties revolve around the charisma of their leaders, though not all populist leaders are equally charismatic. While figures such as Jean-Marie Le Pen or Viktor Orbán may be deemed charismatic, not every populist fits this mold. Nonetheless, once in power, populist movements often rely on charismatic leadership to erode institutional checks and balances, politicize the bureaucracy, and pursue divisive political strategies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Urbinati, 2019; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This trend reinforces the structural link between charismatic authority and populism.

Another major theoretical perspective explaining the rise of populism focuses on crises of democratic representation and legitimacy gaps. Laclau (2005) connects the emergence of populist

movements to moments when hegemonic orders are disrupted and existing institutions fail to respond to societal demands. For him, crises of representation lie at the heart of populist and anti-establishment politics. Similarly, Mouffe (2005, 2018) argues that the post-political impasse within contemporary democracies creates fertile ground for populist leaders. In this context, populist figures are often constructed against a perception of a technocratic and interest-driven political order that fails to meet public expectations (Panizza, 2005). Mair (2023) contends that the ideological convergence of mainstream parties in Europe, along with their neglect of the representative function, has emboldened populist actors. As parties increasingly emphasize managerial functions, they have distanced themselves from representation, thereby weakening the link between the people and the political system.

This literature frequently treats populism as a symptom: A widespread perception of representational crisis enables the emergence of populist movements, which in turn perpetuate that perception and sustain populism's appeal (Urbinati, 2019).

From a Weberian perspective, contemporary populist leaders derive legitimacy through a charismatic and plebiscitary model of democracy. Weber (1994) suggested that in mass democracies, charismatic leadership could evolve into a form of "plebiscitary leader democracy" (Führerdemokratie), in which the leader receives direct authority from the people through elections or referenda, yet exercises power in ways that undermine parliamentary oversight (Bendix, 1977). The populist leadership styles that have emerged in the 21st century appear to confirm this prediction, often instrumentalizing public support to centralize authority and personalize institutions (Pappas, 2019; Mounk, 2018).

In this respect, there is a structural tension between populist leadership and the core principles of liberal democracy. Mudde (2019) describes this as a "pro-democratic but anti-liberal" tendency: while populist leaders invoke popular sovereignty, they often dismiss liberal democratic norms such as the separation of powers, rule of law, and minority rights. Müller (2016) similarly argues that by claiming exclusive representation of "the people," populists delegitimize political opposition and thereby erode pluralism from within.

In sum, the literature offers a multilayered analytical framework for understanding both the causes (e.g., legitimacy and representation crises, social polarization) and consequences (e.g., democratic backsliding, institutional weakening) of charismatic populist leadership.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodological approach. It combines discourse analysis with comparative case study methods to examine both the linguistic practices of selected leaders and the patterns of charismatic populist leadership across different political and cultural contexts. This section outlines the theoretical foundations and the application of both methods within the research.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative approach that explores how language generates meaning and structures power relations within a given social context (Gee, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). According to this method, language does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs and reproduces social realities (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). Discourse analysis is particularly well-suited to examining political discourse, where ideological and hegemonic struggles are prominent. It focuses on how language is intertwined with mechanisms of power (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As such, it has been widely employed across political science, sociology, and linguistics to analyze concepts such as identity, authority, and representation (Aydın-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2019).

In this study, discourse analysis is employed in conjunction with critical discourse analysis (CDA), which seeks to uncover the implicit power relations, ideological structures, and social

inequalities embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 2010). The method is applied to public statements by Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro—such as campaign speeches, social media content, and official declarations. The primary aim is to uncover how these leaders construct themselves as figures of charismatic authority and how they build the populist narrative of "the people" through strategic discursive devices.

For example, Trump's claim that "I alone can fix it" positions him as the nation's sole savior, while his depiction of mainstream media and political opponents as "enemies of the people" reflects the discursive legitimization of charismatic leadership (Mercieca, 2020). Similarly, Modi frequently employs Hindu cultural references to construct a dual image of himself as a national hero who rose from "tea seller to prime minister," while Bolsonaro portrays himself as a "tough," "honest," and "savior-like" figure standing against the corrupt elite (Hunter & Power, 2019).

Comparative Case Study

Comparative case study is a research method involving the systematic analysis of multiple cases to understand the manifestation of a particular phenomenon—in this case, charismatic populist leadership—across different contexts. Kaarbo and Beasley (1999) define comparative case study as "the systematic comparison of two or more cases derived through case study methods." The approach allows for in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases in order to generate theoretical generalizations and highlight contextual differences. It is widely used in social sciences, particularly in the study of complex phenomena such as political leadership and regime typologies.

In this study, Donald Trump (USA), Narendra Modi (India), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) were selected through purposive sampling, as they represent clear examples of both charismatic authority and populist rhetoric. All three leaders came to power in functioning democratic regimes during the post-2000s era and gained mass support through a combination of personal charisma and populist discourse. Despite these similarities, the diversity of their political systems (e.g., presidential vs. parliamentary) and historical-cultural contexts strengthens the method's capacity to test contextual variation. Moreover, the inclusion of leaders from North America, Asia, and South America enhances the study's geographic diversity and contributes to its methodological generalizability.

The data set for each leader includes primary sources such as speeches, social media posts (particularly on Twitter), election campaign materials, and party programs, as well as secondary academic literature analyzing their leadership. The findings from the discourse analysis were categorized along thematic axes (e.g., "construction of charisma," "populist rhetoric," "relations with institutions") and were then systematically compared across cases. This methodological framework enables not only the analysis of leaders' discursive strategies but also a comparative evaluation of how these strategies interact with institutional structures.

The research design prioritizes both internal coherence and external validity. In social science, comparative analysis is a powerful tool for generating causal explanations. When similar outcomes are observed under different initial conditions—or when different outcomes arise under similar conditions—comparative inquiry enhances theoretical robustness. In this regard, the present study, grounded in Weberian theory, seeks to test the explanatory power of the concept of charismatic authority and its interplay with populist discourse across diverse contexts, thereby contributing to new theoretical insights.

The Reconstruction of Charismatic Authority in Contemporary Politics

Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority has historically been associated with exceptional leaders who emerge in times of crisis. However, 21st-century political leaders construct charisma using

tools and strategies that differ markedly from those available in Weber's time. In particular, social media, mass communication technologies, and professional image management have become central to shaping the contemporary manifestation of charismatic leadership. Within this framework, figures such as Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro have constructed their charismatic personas not only through rhetoric but also through media performance, digital presence, and direct interaction with the public.

Donald Trump

Trump's construction of charismatic authority relied heavily on media culture and image branding (Street, 2018; Kellner, 2017). Before entering politics, Trump had already gained recognition through his presence in television and business, which he later leveraged during his 2016 presidential campaign. Portraying himself as an outsider who claimed, "I alone can fix it," he positioned himself as an extraordinary savior. His theatrical performances at rallies and emotionally charged connection with the audience enabled him to craft a charismatic image distinct from conventional politicians (Moffitt, 2016).

Support for Trump often took the form of Weberian personal devotion; scholars have referred to his base as a "cult" or "fanatical community" (Serwer, 2020; Goldsmith and Moen, 2024). The phenomenon known as Trumpism reveals how charisma can be centralized ideologically and culturally around the persona of a leader. His use of slogans like "Make America Great Again" and "Drain the Swamp," along with his provocative, anti-establishment discourse, solidified his image as a bold leader defying the political status quo (Mercieca, 2020). This aligns with Weber's (1978) observation that charismatic leaders often gain legitimacy by disrupting established norms.

Trump's persistent use of rallies and direct communication via social media—especially Twitter—sustained his charisma and kept him at the center of political discourse (Ott, 2017). For many of his supporters, he was viewed as a messianic figure, and their loyalty extended to legitimizing his rejection of electoral outcomes. This constitutes a striking manifestation of Weberian charisma within the context of contemporary American politics.

Narendra Modi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi exemplifies a charismatic leadership model that fuses traditional Hindu nationalism with the tools of the digital age. According to Rai (2023), Modi constructs his charisma along three key axes:

1. Historical and religious references: Modi has cultivated the image of a saint-like leader by aligning himself with historical figures such as Gandhi and invoking symbols from Hindu mythology.

2. Image and body language: Through his traditional attire, humble background, and public comportment, he reinforces a "man of the people" image.

3. Digital communication strategies: Modi is highly active on social media platforms, using digital campaigns to directly reach the masses and strengthen his personal cult.

These strategies form the ideological foundation of "Moditva," consolidating Modi's charismatic leadership. Among his followers, a near-religious devotion has emerged, with the BJP framing him as the architect of a "new golden era" (Weber, 1978; Rai, 2023). The Modi case also illustrates the institutionalization of charisma over time. Since 2014, the charismatic aura surrounding Modi has transcended personal appeal and evolved into a cult of leadership embedded within state structures (The Guardian, 2024).

Jair Bolsonaro

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro has constructed charismatic authority through his military background, conservative values, and aggressive populist rhetoric. In the wake of the Lava Jato corruption scandal, Bolsonaro capitalized on anti-elite sentiments and presented himself as a "clean," "honest," and "fearless" leader. The popular reference to him as "Mito" (The Myth) reflects the attribution of extraordinary qualities to his persona (Cunha, 2023).

Although Catholic, Bolsonaro secured religious legitimacy by forging strong ties with Evangelical voters. His campaign slogan, *"Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos"* ("Brazil above everything, God above all"), infused his candidacy with spiritual undertones (Mezzanotti & Løland, 2023). This aligns with Weber's (1978) notion of the mystical dimension of charisma; Bolsonaro was idealized by many as a divinely appointed savior.

Bolsonaro also demonstrated high digital proficiency through platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, allowing him to bypass mainstream media and establish an anti-systemic communication style. This enhanced his appeal among young male voters, who viewed him as an authoritarian yet charismatic figure (Cunha, 2023). His military background and pro-gun stance resonated with public demands for security, reinforcing his image as a "strongman." At the height of his charisma in 2019, Bolsonaro's likeness became an icon at street demonstrations.

The cases of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro reveal how contemporary charismatic leadership is reconstructed through media, image, and crisis narratives. All three are perceived by their followers as extraordinary saviors and embodiments of Weberian charisma, continuously reproduced through media channels. In today's political environment, charisma no longer relies solely on innate traits but is shaped by performance, storytelling, digital visibility, and the instrumentalization of crises. Thus, Weber's conceptualization remains relevant in the digital age, offering a robust theoretical framework for understanding modern political power.

How Populism Sustains Charismatic Authority

The symbiotic relationship between charismatic authority and populism offers a crucial analytical framework for understanding the operation of contemporary populist leadership. While populist ideology provides a legitimizing political discourse and fertile ground for charismatic leaders, charismatic leadership, in turn, enables the mass appeal and emotional intensity necessary for the populist movement's expansion and continuity. This interaction is clearly and systematically observable in the cases of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro.

The core binary of populist discourse—between "the people" and "the elites"—facilitates the positioning of the charismatic leader as the sole and authentic representative of the people. The portrayal of the leader as "the voice of the people" and the "embodiment of the general will" aligns with both populist ideology and Weberian conceptualizations of charismatic authority (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005). As Mudde (2004) argues, populism elevates "the people" as a morally pure and unified subject while casting elites as a corrupt and illegitimate adversary. Within this dichotomy, the charismatic leader gives concrete form to the abstract will of the people, becoming the focal point for collective emotions. Müller (2016) notes that the populist leader monopolizes political legitimacy by rejecting pluralism and asserting, "we alone represent the people," a claim ideally embodied in charismatic leadership. This model of representation, when combined with Weber's (1978) notion of personal devotion to an "extraordinary" leader, shifts legitimacy from institutional foundations to the person of the leader.

Donald Trump exemplifies this mutual reinforcement between charisma and populism. By vowing to "drain the swamp" and challenging the political establishment, he cast himself as an outsider savior and "the voice of the silent majority." His framing of a stark opposition between the people and elites, media, or immigrants strengthened his charismatic image. Trump's theatrical expressions of emotion—anger, fear, and hope—at mass rallies forged a powerful emotional bond with his supporters. Joosse and Zelinsky (2022) describe this as "anger-centered charismatic bonding." The collective rage expressed at Trump's rallies served as an emotional adhesive that fed his charisma. This phenomenon also resonates with Weber's lesser-known concept of "berserk-charisma," in which emotional intensity plays a central legitimating role.

Trump's populist discourse reinforced his charismatic authority ideologically and emotionally, allowing him to maintain legitimacy despite scandals and institutional violations. This dynamic illustrates the reciprocal sustenance of charisma and populism.

Narendra Modi represents a distinct populist-charismatic leadership style shaped by India's unique political context. His rise channeled popular discontent toward the Congress Party's long-standing dominance, bureaucratic inefficiency, and elite political class. Through themes of developmental nationalism and cultural rootedness, Modi constructed a potent populist narrative (Sciences Po, 2019; CIDOB, 2023). Portraying himself as a leader "from the common people," Modi often references his childhood selling tea to bolster this image (Kalidasan, 2019). Additionally, postcolonial Indian political theory offers relevant insights into the nature of Modi's leadership. Chatterjee (2004) notes that in postcolonial democracies, political mobilization often occurs in the "political society" rather than formal "civil society," privileging direct leader-people relations over institutional mediation. Modi's appeal to the informal sectors, lower classes, and religious identity groups mirrors this pattern. His leadership can thus be understood not only through populist or Weberian lenses, but also as a localized synthesis of postcolonial political practice and charismatic identity politics.

Anti-elitism—a hallmark of populist rhetoric—is central to Modi's discourse. His opposition to the elite class symbolized by "Lutyens Delhi" legitimizes his charismatic persona ideologically. Modi positions himself as a figure who embodies public aspirations and promises to redress the failures of the past (Vasudeva, 2025). His decision to demonetize large currency bills in 2016, although economically controversial, was framed through populist rhetoric as a revolutionary step against elites and was largely accepted by the public (Sciences Po, 2019).

Modi's populism is also closely intertwined with Hindutva ideology. Within this framework, a narrative of Hindu victimization at the hands of secular elites has elevated Modi as a historical leader who restores suppressed values (Saleem et al., 2022). Thus, populist discourse not only enables an emotional bond with Modi but also situates his leadership within a broader cultural and historical mission.

Jair Bolsonaro likewise reinforces his charismatic authority through populist discourse. In the lead-up to Brazil's 2018 election, widespread corruption scandals and opposition to the Workers' Party enabled Bolsonaro to present himself as an honest, anti-system figure. His popular nickname "Mito" (the Myth) illustrates the attribution of exceptional, almost mythical, qualities to his leadership (Cunha, 2023). His slogan "Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos" ("Brazil above everything, God above all") fused populist messaging with religious legitimacy, while his Catholic background and alliance with Evangelical voters allowed him to be framed as a divinely inspired leader (Mezzanotti & Løland, 2023).

Bolsonaro's populism is anchored in a systematic strategy of enemy construction. Institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, and the press were frequently depicted as "enemies of the people,"

invoking Weber's (1978) observation that charismatic leaders often challenge rational-legal authority. As Mounk and Kyle (2018) argue, populist leaders seek to delegitimize democratic institutions to consolidate power. Bolsonaro adopted this strategy by reframing political failures—such as deforestation or COVID-19 mismanagement—as the result of "foreign conspiracies" or "leftist plots," thereby strengthening his support base (Fernandes et al., 2021). From a Latin American perspective, political theorists such as Dussel (2008) emphasize the colonial legacy of exclusion and the populist leader's role in rearticulating power through symbolic reactivation of historical grievances. Bolsonaro's rise, while ideologically conservative, also drew from this legacy by framing his authority as a rupture with a corrupt political elite shaped by Brazil's postcolonial statehood. This reflects a broader pattern in Latin American populism, where charisma functions as both rupture and continuity with authoritarian traditions.

These three cases demonstrate how populism both legitimizes and sustains charismatic leadership. Populist discourse elevates the leader as the living embodiment of the people's collective will, rendering him politically indispensable. When Weber's concept of individual charisma intersects with modern populism, charisma is collectivized through popular narratives and reinforced by claims of historical mission.

The tendency of populist leaders to manufacture a permanent state of crisis is also noteworthy. Trump's narrative of an "invaded America," Modi's portrayal of internal and external enemies surrounding India, and Bolsonaro's invocation of a "communist threat" have all served to keep their publics in a state of mobilized vigilance and reinforce loyalty to the leader. As Laclau (2005) emphasizes, crisis is the foundational terrain on which populist discourse thrives, and it is within this terrain that charismatic leadership emerges.

In conclusion, populism constructs the interpretive universe within which the charismatic leader operates. It provides the narrative framework that gives meaning to the leader's words and actions. This discourse enables the personalization of political space, the suspension of institutional norms, and the building of a mass shield against criticism. As Pappas (2019) notes, populist regimes built on charismatic leadership endure as long as the leader's personal appeal remains intact; when charisma fades, the regime either transitions or the populist moment ends. The cases of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro illustrate the contemporary manifestations of this cycle: all three have sustained their charismatic authority through the narrative, emotional, and crisis-producing mechanisms supplied by populism, thereby pushing the boundaries of leader-centered political representation.

Charisma-Based Legitimacy and Democratic Institutions

The relationship between charismatic populist leaders and democratic institutions constitutes one of the most debated issues in contemporary political theory, both theoretically and empirically. On the one hand, these leaders come to power through democratic elections by invoking the direct will of the people and grounding their legitimacy in mass support. On the other hand, they often clash with core liberal-democratic institutions such as the rule of law, separation of powers, media freedom, and judicial independence (Pappas, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). This paradox generates a structural tension between charisma-based legitimacy and the institutional logic of constitutional democracy.

Within Weber's (1978) typology of authority, charismatic authority is inherently anti-institutional, anti-routine, and exceptional in nature. The legitimacy of the charismatic leader stems not from legal-rational rules or traditional norms, but from a belief in the leader's extraordinary personal qualities. For this reason, Weber defined charismatic authority as a temporary force that typically emerges in moments of crisis and argued that it cannot be institutionalized as a long-term form of governance. The emergence of a charismatic leader presupposes the exclusion or overthrow of the

existing bureaucratic order. In this context, charisma arises precisely when established rules are suspended or challenged.

However, in contemporary democratic regimes, charismatic leadership no longer manifests as a revolutionary force from outside the system, but rather as a strategy developed from within existing institutional frameworks, aimed at transforming them from the inside (Mounk, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This phenomenon directly relates to Weber's notion of the "routinization of charisma." As charismatic leaders consolidate power, they seek to stabilize their legitimacy by embedding charisma within legal or traditional frameworks. Yet this process simultaneously carries the risk of eroding the normative structures of institutional democracy (Weber, 1978).

In many cases, this transformation leads to the weakening of democratic norms, the politicization of institutions, and violations of the principle of separation of powers (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Laclau, 2005). Charismatic leaders often convert popular support into a form of "total delegation," thereby undermining the independence of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. At this point, charisma-based legitimacy aligns with a majoritarian understanding of democracy but conflicts with the checks and balances essential to liberal constitutionalism.

This tension is clearly observable in the cases of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro. All three leaders came to power through elections and used popular support to reinforce their claims to exclusive representation. Over time, each pursued policies that clashed with constitutional norms and challenged liberal-democratic institutions. Their trajectories reveal how charisma-based authority can directly influence the functioning of democratic institutions and, in the long run, render them ineffective in favor of personalized rule.

Donald Trump and American Democratic Institutions

Donald Trump's presidency represents an exceptional case that tested the institutional resilience of the American constitutional system in the face of charismatic leadership. The U.S. Constitution establishes a strict checks-and-balances framework grounded in the principle of separation of powers, with judicial independence, a free press, and congressional oversight serving as foundational pillars of constitutional democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). However, throughout his presidency, Trump systematically clashed with these constitutional institutions, personalizing the executive branch and constructing a model of charismatic authority.

When several of Trump's executive actions—such as the travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries—were ruled unconstitutional by federal courts, he publicly attacked the judiciary, referring to judges as "so-called judges" and questioning their legitimacy. This represents a direct challenge by a charismatic leader to the judicial branch, one of the core components of rational-legal authority. Similarly, Trump consistently accused media organizations of producing "fake news," discrediting investigative journalism and constructing a rhetoric that demanded citizens place trust solely in him. When confronted with criticism from within the state bureaucracy, he framed such opposition as part of a "deep state" conspiracy, thereby attempting to criminalize legitimate political dissent.

Trump's conduct illustrates the antagonistic relationship between charisma-based legitimacy and institutional constraints. By asserting that his popular support was the ultimate source of legitimacy—using statements like "millions voted for me; I represent the people, not you"—he questioned the right of institutions to limit his authority, effectively positioning his personal mandate above constitutional rules. This attitude aligns directly with Weber's (1978) characterization of charismatic authority as inherently oppositional to both legal-rational and traditional forms of legitimacy.

The most dramatic example of this dynamic emerged in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. Trump refused to acknowledge the results, alleging widespread voter fraud despite the absence of credible evidence. These claims deeply undermined the public's perception of electoral legitimacy among his supporters. On January 6, 2021, Trump's followers stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to halt the certification of the election results—a striking demonstration of how a charismatic leader can mobilize masses against constitutional institutions. This moment has been widely recognized as a historical rupture that revealed the latent threat charismatic authority poses to democratic governance.

Although American institutions—courts, state electoral commissions, and Congress—ultimately fulfilled their constitutional duties and certified the election results, the events surrounding Trump's refusal to concede highlighted the extent to which populist charisma can stretch the boundaries of democratic norms. They also exemplified how the tension between liberal institutionalism and charismatic leadership can materialize in concrete political crises.

Narendra Modi and Democratic Institutions in India

Although India is often described as the world's largest democracy, it operates as a hybrid political system where strong and weak institutions coexist. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, this structure has evolved toward a plebiscitary mode of governance grounded in charismatic authority, in which the role of constitutional institutions has been increasingly reduced to endorsing executive decisions (Jaffrelot, 2021). As the head of a strong parliamentary majority, particularly during his second term (post-2019), Modi has centralized decision-making and developed a set of governance practices that dramatically concentrate power in the office of the Prime Minister (Tudor, 2023).

During this period, the legislative branch has largely functioned as a rubber stamp for executive policy, and the opposition's oversight capacity has been significantly weakened. Several critical legislative reforms—such as changes to citizenship law and agricultural regulations—were passed rapidly with minimal parliamentary debate and justified primarily through appeals to popular support. This tendency corresponds to the plebiscitary form of charismatic leadership in Weberian terms: the leader claims to represent the direct will of the people, rendering institutional deliberation secondary and viewing majority support as sufficient for legitimacy (Rai, 2023).

Although judicial independence has traditionally been a cornerstone of India's constitutional framework, concerns have grown during the Modi era about increased executive influence over high-level judicial appointments. The judiciary's tendency to align with executive preferences or remain silent on politically sensitive cases has raised alarms about the erosion of the rule of law. Similarly, declines in press freedom have been documented. Journalists and media outlets critical of Modi or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have faced indirect pressures such as tax investigations, advertising bans, and criminal prosecutions, all of which have contributed to increasing media control (Freedom House, 2023).

These developments have fueled criticisms that Modi's claim to charisma-based legitimacy has been accompanied by efforts to neutralize liberal-democratic checks and balances (Jaffrelot, 2021). Nevertheless, India's relatively robust federal structure, the occasional resilience of the constitutional judiciary, and the continued presence of civil society make it difficult to argue that the institutional order has been completely dismantled (Chhibber and Verma, 2018). Still, Modi's leadership has cultivated a majoritarian political culture in which opposition parties are frequently portrayed as antagonists to the popular will, and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities are subordinated to majority preferences.

For example, the revocation of Kashmir's constitutional autonomy and the enactment of the controversial citizenship law have been widely viewed as violations of democratic pluralism. These actions illustrate a shift away from governance rooted in the bureaucratic principles of rational-legal authority, as described by Weber (1978), toward a model centered on personal leadership and the belief

in the leader's virtuous intentions. Modi's charismatic figure has popularized the notion that "if the leader's intent is pure, institutions should not obstruct him," thereby framing institutional checks as illegitimate or anti-democratic. This dynamic exemplifies the structural tension between charismatic populist leadership and liberal democratic norms, as theorized by Pappas (2019).

Jair Bolsonaro and Democratic Institutions in Brazil

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency stands as a characteristic example of the rising wave of "authoritarian populism" in Latin America and has been marked by sustained and intense conflict with Brazil's democratic institutions (Spektor, 2025). The Brazilian Constitution establishes a strong system of checks and balances among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, with the Federal Supreme Court (STF) and the National Congress serving as key counterweights to presidential authority. However, from the beginning of his tenure, Bolsonaro openly confronted these institutions, accusing high court judges, particularly from the STF, of "treason" for allegedly interfering in investigations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the STF upheld public health measures enacted by state governors and mayors, Bolsonaro targeted these actors as "saboteurs of the nation" (Duarte, 2023). As the 2022 elections approached, he repeatedly cast doubt on the legitimacy of the electronic voting system and accused the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) of undermining the democratic process. This rhetoric was widely seen as part of a preemptive strategy to delegitimize the electoral outcome in the event of defeat. Indeed, following his loss in 2023, Bolsonaro's supporters launched an assault on the capital, demonstrating the real-world consequences of such discursive tactics. The incident confirmed concerns about the potential of charismatic populism to generate mass mobilization against constitutional institutions.

Bolsonaro's charismatic authority also manifested in ways that challenged democratic norms in the sphere of civil-military relations. A former army officer, Bolsonaro frequently praised the 1964–1985 military dictatorship and made statements such as "our first task should have been to shut down Congress," framing constitutional rules as obstacles to the popular will he claimed to embody (Hunter & Power, 2019). Such discourse exemplifies how charismatic leadership, as theorized by Weber (1978), may seek to delegitimize legal-rational authority in favor of personalized rule.

His presidency also saw serious backsliding in terms of press freedom and anti-corruption enforcement. Threats against critical journalists, economic pressures on media outlets, and attempts at censorship reflected the erosion of the media's watchdog role (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Moreover, interference with investigations targeting Bolsonaro's allies, and the weakening or dismantling of anti-corruption agencies, highlighted the exclusionary nature of charismatic authority with respect to accountability mechanisms (Pappas, 2019). As a leader who claimed to directly represent the people's will, Bolsonaro often interpreted institutional oversight as a threat to his legitimacy and sought to bypass it—clearly illustrating the populist-charismatic inclination to undermine liberal democratic checks and balances.

Charismatic Populism and Democratic Backsliding: A Comparative Assessment

When considered together, the cases of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro reveal a clear pattern: although charismatic populist leaders ascend to power through democratic means, they tend to consolidate their rule by weakening democratic institutions, disabling oversight mechanisms, and personalizing political authority (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This pattern is frequently conceptualized in the literature as "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016). The comprehensive study by Kyle and Mounk (2018) on 46 populist leaders demonstrates that such governments, once in office, tend to experience increased corruption, restrictions on civil liberties, and deterioration of institutional

checks and balances. These findings suggest a structural incompatibility between charismatic populism and liberal-democratic norms.

While each case is shaped by its own context-specific dynamics, the general trajectory reflects a convergent political logic. In the United States, entrenched constitutional institutions limited Trump's more authoritarian impulses; in India, elections have remained relatively free; and in Brazil, civil society resisted Bolsonaro's attempts at full institutional takeover. Nevertheless, all three cases demonstrate the potential of charisma-based legitimacy to undermine the pluralistic principles of constitutional democracy (Pappas, 2019; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

According to Weber's (1978) typology of authority, democratic institutions are fundamentally expressions of rational-legal authority, rooted in the rule of law, bureaucratic procedures, and institutional constraints. Charismatic authority, by contrast, tends to erode this institutional order in favor of personal leadership and exceptionalism. Modern democracies, in fact, rest on a delicate balance between these two poles: while leadership and vision are necessary, such authority must remain subject to constitutional accountability.

The charismatic populist wave disrupts this balance by shifting the pendulum toward the leader, generating hybrid regimes that resemble "illiberal democracy" (Zakaria, 1997), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky & Way, 2010), or "semi-authoritarianism" (Diamond, 2002). In such regimes, elections take place and leaders emphasize popular support, yet core liberal-democratic principles—such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, and institutional oversight—are systematically undermined. The political practices of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro provide empirical examples that approximate these regime types.

That said, the relationship between charismatic leaders and institutions is not always one of direct confrontation. Weber's concept of the "routinization of charisma" points to the possibility of charisma becoming bureaucratized and institutionalized over time. In the case of Modi, the consolidation of loyalty within the BJP and the reconfiguration of state institutions to align with the leader's charisma has laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of charisma (Slater, 2003). This dynamic produces a form of hegemonic rule that weakens democratic competition and approaches one-party dominance.

In conclusion, there exists a structural tension between charisma-based forms of legitimacy and the institutional mechanisms of constitutional democracy. Populist charismatic leaders tend to marginalize intermediary institutions by claiming to represent the people directly. This often leads to the neglect of representative principles, the rule of law, and minority rights. As Mudde has argued, populism may manifest as "democracy against liberalism," and in the case of charismatic populism, this perspective evolves into a model of leader-centric democracy. Such a model renders democracy vulnerable to authoritarian drift. However, as all three cases show, democratic institutions have not been entirely dismantled; civil society and constitutional checks have demonstrated varying degrees of resilience. This suggests that charismatic populism, while powerful, has not achieved absolute hegemony and that the resilience of liberal democracy, though context-dependent, remains significant.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority offers a powerful theoretical framework for understanding contemporary populist leadership; however, this framework alone is insufficient. The analysis of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro illustrates how Weberian charisma has been reconstructed in modern democracies, how it articulates with populism, and how it transforms its relationship with democratic institutions. This section situates these findings within the relevant theoretical literature and evaluates both similarities and contextual differences through comparative analysis.

Leader Cult, Charisma, And Political Legitimacy: Contemporary Populism From A Weberian perspective.

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Weber (1978) originally conceptualized charismatic authority as a revolutionary and temporary form of leadership that arises in extraordinary circumstances. In contrast, today's charismatic leadership emerges within democratic regimes and often establishes long-lasting power using systemic mechanisms. This shift necessitates an update of Weber's framework. In particular, with the rise of digitalization, global media environments, and social networking platforms, charisma now depends not only on mythical personal traits but also on media visibility, digital performance, and strategic storytelling (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018).

Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro bypassed traditional channels of representation by engaging directly with voters through digital platforms, establishing forms of personal loyalty based on what Weber (1978) termed "irrational submission" (Mason, 2018). Their charismatic authority was reinforced not only by personal appeal but also by populist narratives (Pappas, 2019). Under contemporary conditions, charisma has become a political resource that is deeply interwoven with media capital and subject to reproduction.

Despite operating in distinct cultural and political settings, all three leaders demonstrated similar tendencies in challenging democratic norms and exhibiting authoritarian inclinations. These patterns are directly linked to structural disruptions caused by the global financial crisis post-2008, crises of political representation, and identity-based tensions (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Goodwin, 2016; Urbinati, 2019). Populist charismatic leaders have mobilized popular discontent born of these disruptions, presenting themselves as outsiders who embody the "true essence" of the nation (Müller, 2016; Laclau, 2005; Ostiguy, 2017).

Each leader constructed a form of anti-pluralist representation by emphasizing dominant religious or ethnic identities. This reflects the populist tendency to erode pluralist democracy through a binary division between "us" and "them" and aligns with Weber's (1978) notion of charisma as an irrational devotion to a sanctified leader figure (Mudde, 2004).

While general patterns converge, the modes of charismatic authority construction and its impact on institutional systems differ contextually. Trump's charisma was secular and rooted in economic nationalism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), whereas religious discourse played a central role in both Modi's and Bolsonaro's leadership styles (Jaffrelot, 2021; Barbosa & Casarões, 2023). Weber's analysis of the link between charisma and religion finds contemporary resonance in their messianic leadership.

Institutional resilience also varied significantly across the cases. Trump's authoritarian impulses were largely constrained by the strength of the U.S. judiciary and federal system (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In contrast, the relative weakness of opposition forces and ease of institutional politicization in India gave Modi greater room for maneuver (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). In Brazil, Bolsonaro's populist charisma encountered notable resistance from civil society and the judiciary (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

In the literature, two contrasting perspectives emerge regarding the democratic implications of populist charismatic leadership. One view holds that such leaders systematically erode democratic norms, politicize institutions, and pave the way for authoritarianism (Mounk, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The findings of this study support this view: all three leaders weakened accountability mechanisms, suppressed the press, and undermined checks and balances (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

An alternative perspective considers the populist wave as a form of critique aimed at democratic systems. Populism may act as a warning signal by expressing excluded demands and pressuring the democratic system to reform (Mouffe, 2018; Panizza, 2005; Urbinati, 2019). The post-Trump era in the U.S., which has witnessed increased civic engagement, electoral reform, and a revitalized civil society,

partially supports this claim. Similarly, the united opposition and civic resistance against Bolsonaro in Brazil performed a comparable role (Melo & Pereira, 2024).

This duality is described in the literature as the "populist paradox": populism enhances democratic participation while simultaneously threatening democratic norms (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Pappas, 2019).

According to Weber (1978), charismatic authority is inherently ephemeral; over time, it either becomes routinized and institutionalized or fades away. Trump's political retreat following electoral defeat illustrates charisma's potential for dissipation, while his bid for the 2024 presidency suggests that it has not been extinguished entirely. Bolsonaro has undergone a similar trajectory, yet the legacy he left behind exposed the fragilities of Brazilian democracy. Modi's case illustrates a different trajectory— one of institutionalization. Here, charismatic leadership is embedded within the system through bureaucratic restructuring and a culture of partisan loyalty (Slater, 2003).

This dynamic is consistent with Weber's "routinization of charisma" but also reveals its potential to harm democratic pluralism. When charismatic leadership becomes institutionalized, it tends to curtail opposition and generate asymmetric competition. In addition to the structural tensions explored above, it is essential to incorporate Weber's critical warning regarding the transformation of charismatic authority over time. Weber (1978) emphasized that charisma, once routinized, tends to lose its revolutionary and emancipatory potential and can become a tool of domination. He warned that "today's saviors may become tomorrow's tyrants" as charismatic legitimacy, once institutionalized, can mutate into authoritarian control. This transformation is particularly evident when personal loyalty to the leader substitutes legal accountability and when bureaucratic structures are repurposed to preserve rather than constrain charismatic power. Thus, the routinization of charisma not only represents a shift in legitimacy but also poses a normative risk to democratic governance.

A complementary insight into the degeneration of leadership can be found in the classical sociology of Ibn Khaldun. In his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun (1967) developed a cyclical theory of political power, asserting that dynasties and ruling elites tend to decline after an initial phase of vigor and solidarity (*asabiyyah*). According to this theory, the first generation of leaders arises from struggle and shared purpose, exhibiting courage and austerity. However, subsequent generations born into comfort and privilege gradually lose this cohesion, giving way to moral decay, administrative corruption, and nepotism. This process echoes Weber's observation about the routinization and eventual ossification of charisma. As charismatic authority becomes institutionalized, it risks replicating the very bureaucratic stagnation it originally emerged to challenge. Placing Ibn Khaldun's cyclical model alongside Weber's analysis thus provides a cross-civilizational perspective on how leader-centered legitimacy may erode over time due to internal decay rather than external threat.

In sum, this discussion underscores that Weber's (1978) concept of charismatic authority remains highly relevant for analyzing contemporary populist leadership. However, the concept must be updated and situated within the evolving contexts of digital politics, populist ideology, and identity-based mobilization (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017; Pappas, 2019). Charismatic populism constitutes a hybrid political form that deviates from classical representative democracy, simultaneously enhancing participation while weakening institutions (Urbinati, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This dual nature positions charismatic leaders as both an internal force of democratic vitality and an external threat to liberal norms. Consequently, contemporary political analysis must approach charismatic populist leadership not as a personal trait alone but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by institutional context, social structure, and political culture.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to analyze the relationship between Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and contemporary forms of populist leadership by examining the cases of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro. It has sought to explain how populist charismatic leadership is reconstructed today, how it builds legitimacy, and how it interacts—often contentiously—with democratic institutions. The findings derived from the study's three central research questions can be summarized as follows:

(1) The Reconstruction of Charismatic Authority in Contemporary Contexts: Modern charismatic leaders no longer rely solely on the exceptional personal traits Weber described, but also reproduce charisma performatively through tools provided by the media age. Trump leveraged his visibility in media and popular culture to fashion himself as an "anti-system" figure. Modi cultivated a "sacred leader" image through digital propaganda and Hindu nationalist narratives. Bolsonaro, emphasizing public security and religious conservatism, constructed himself as a charismatic savior. All three leaders established emotional bonds with their constituencies through social media, rallies, and personal storytelling, reinforcing their charismatic authority through visibility, crisis narratives, and highly individualized leadership styles.

(2) The Role of Populism in Sustaining Charisma: Populist discourse has provided the ideological framework that enables both the emergence and continuity of charismatic leadership. In this symbiotic relationship, the populist leader perpetuates a sense of crisis and strategically mobilizes emotions such as anger, fear, and hope to foster charismatic loyalty. In all three cases, this approach encouraged affective devotion over rational evaluation. Thus, charismatic populism has generated a new form of legitimacy that goes beyond electoral success and reshapes representative democracy itself.

(3) The Tension Between Charisma-Based Legitimacy and Democratic Institutions: The governing practices of Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro reveal a structural conflict between charismatic leadership and democratic institutions. Legislative bodies, judicial systems, and the media have frequently clashed with these leaders' personalized agendas. Checks and balances have been eroded as leaders personalized decision-making and regarded institutions not as necessary mechanisms of governance, but as obstacles to be overcome. Nonetheless, in each context, institutions and civil society have demonstrated varying degrees of resilience, indicating that charismatic waves have not succeeded in establishing total hegemony. However, the majoritarian understanding of democracy promoted by populist leadership poses serious threats to minority rights and institutional autonomy.

Based on this analysis, the study advances three key conclusions:

First, crises of representation in contemporary democracies have provided fertile ground for the rise of charismatic populist leaders. In line with Weber's assertion that charisma emerges in moments of crisis when conventional authority fails, public distrust in political systems has found expression in alternative leadership figures.

Second, once in power, these leaders test not only institutional resilience but also democratic norms themselves. The authoritarian potential of populist charisma is directly related to the strength of a democratic system's immune capacity. When judicial independence, press freedom, and institutional autonomy are weak, charismatic leadership can swiftly transform liberal democracy.

Third, the tension Weber identified between charismatic and bureaucratic authority has re-emerged today in the conflict between populism and constitutional democracy. This binary constitutes one of the central challenges for contemporary political science.

These findings not only have empirical implications but also provoke ethical reflection on the role of citizens in sustaining charismatic regimes. To what extent can emotional devotion to a leader be reconciled with democratic accountability? While charismatic leadership often energizes political participation, it may also erode critical citizenship and normalize blind loyalty. In this regard, citizens are not merely passive subjects but active participants in reinforcing or resisting leader-centered politics. The ethical responsibility of democratic publics in maintaining institutional norms and resisting authoritarian tendencies remains a critical but underexplored dimension of contemporary political life.

In light of these findings, the study suggests several directions for future research. First, further comparative analyses could explore how charismatic leadership functions across different regime types (e.g., presidential vs. parliamentary systems). Second, the function of charisma in both right- and left-wing populist movements could be investigated. Finally, research on post-populist recovery processes and the legacy of charismatic leaders after leaving office could significantly enrich the literature.

In conclusion, Weber's theory of charismatic authority—formulated over a century ago—remains a valid and functional analytical tool for understanding contemporary political leadership. However, it must be revised and reinterpreted in light of digitalization, emotionalized political discourse, and persistent crises of representation. Charismatic leadership possesses a powerful capacity to mobilize the public; yet, if left unchecked, it can undermine democratic norms. The future of modern democracies depends on their ability to balance rational-legal authority with charismatic power. As Weber himself emphasized, charisma may transform the system—but the durability of that system depends on embedding charisma within institutional frameworks.

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