

POPULISM AND POWER: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BRAZIL AND HUNGARY'S POLITICAL TRAJECTORIES (2010–2023)

Assignment Type:

Comparative Politics Essay / Democratic Backsliding Report

Objective:

To analyze how populist leadership in Brazil and Hungary influenced democratic institutions, media independence, civil rights, and public policy. The case study enables students to compare two different political systems—presidential and parliamentary—under the influence of right-wing populism.

1. Country Backgrounds

| Country | Leader (Term) | Political Party | Regime Type |
|---------|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Brazil | Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) | Social Liberal Party | Presidential Republic |
| Hungary | Viktor Orbán (2010–Present) | Fidesz | Parliamentary Democracy |

2. What Is Populism?

Populism is often defined as a political approach that pits "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite," emphasizing nationalist values, anti-elitism, and strong executive leadership.

3. Key Research Questions

- How did populist governments reshape public institutions and judiciary independence?
- What was the impact on civil liberties and media pluralism?
- How did both leaders respond to crises (e.g., COVID-19, immigration)?
- Were there any attempts at constitutional restructuring?

4. Institutional Impact Matrix

| Dimension | Brazil | Hungary |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Judiciary Independence | Undermined via rhetoric and budget cuts | Packed with loyalists; weakened checks |
| Media Freedom | Hostile to journalists; rise in misinformation | State control over major outlets |
| Civil Society | Attacked through verbal delegitimization | NGOs restricted via legal hurdles |
| Electoral Integrity | Questioned 2022 election results | Gerrymandering, election law changes |

5. Democratic Indices Comparison

| Index | Brazil (2022) | Hungary (2022) |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Freedom House Score (100) | 72 | 65 |
| Democracy Index (EIU) (10) | 6.9 | 6.5 |
| Press Freedom Rank (RSF) | 92 | 85 |

6. Visuals and Graphs

- **Figure 1:** Timeline of institutional changes under each leader
- **Figure 2:** Freedom House scores (2010–2022) trend line
- **Figure 3:** Budget allocation to public broadcasters and judicial bodies
- **Figure 4:** Bar chart of public trust in media over time

7. Crisis Management Comparison

| Crisis | Bolsonaro (Brazil) | Orbán (Hungary) |
|----------|---|------------------------------|
| COVID-19 | Denialist rhetoric, delayed vaccine rollout | Centralized emergency powers |

| | | |
|----------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Immigration | Not a major issue | Anti-refugee laws, border fencing |
| Civil Protests | Police suppression, anti-LGBTQ statements | Limited protests, controlled dissent |

8. Theoretical Frameworks

- **Cas Mudde's Thin-Centered Populism:** Both leaders used cultural conservatism to consolidate power
- **Levitsky & Ziblatt (How Democracies Die):** Institutions hollowed from within
- **Fareed Zakaria's Illiberal Democracy:** Electoral success + democratic erosion

9. Evaluation Summary

| Impact Category | Observations |
|------------------------|--|
| Institutional Erosion | Evident in judiciary and civil liberties |
| Media Suppression | State propaganda and intimidation of dissenting voices |
| Political Polarization | Increased distrust in electoral systems and science |
| International Response | Brazil faced climate pressure; Hungary faced EU legal action |

10. Strategic Takeaways for Students

- Populism is not inherently anti-democratic but can **erode democracy from within**
- Evaluate the **formal vs. informal power structures**
- Analyze crisis responses to understand leadership legitimacy
- Learn how **media and judiciary independence serve as bulwarks of democracy**

11. Student Deliverables

- Comparative essay (3,000–3,500 words) with citations
- Institutional matrix in Excel / table format

- Visual slides with indicators and graphs
- Annotated reading list of key political theory authors
- Optional interview excerpts (translated press sources)

