International Conference on Research in
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
27 - 29 November 2026 Vienna, Austria

Executive Power, Populism and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Donald Trump

Georgios Vasileiadis

University of Aegean, Greece

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between executive power, populism, and democratic backsliding in contemporary liberal democracies, focusing on the presidency of Donald Trump as a critical case. The primary objective is to explore how the expansion of executive authority, when combined with populist political strategies, may challenge institutional norms and democratic resilience. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on a systematic and critical literature review, synthesizing recent academic contributions in political science, international relations, and governance studies. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and institutional reports published mainly after 2010, with particular emphasis on the post-2016 period.

The findings indicate that populist leadership often utilizes executive instruments—such as executive orders and direct communication channels—to bypass traditional checks and balances, thereby reshaping institutional dynamics. In the case examined, tensions between the executive branch and institutions such as Congress and the Supreme Court of the United States highlight patterns of institutional strain rather than outright institutional breakdown. Furthermore, the strategic use of digital platforms, including Facebook, contributes to political polarization and reinforces leader-centric governance models.

The study concludes that democratic backsliding in advanced democracies tends to occur gradually through norm erosion rather than abrupt systemic collapse. It underscores the importance of reinforcing institutional safeguards, transparency mechanisms and civic accountability. These findings contribute to the broader theoretical debate on the resilience of liberal democracy and offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening democratic governance in an era of rising populism.

Keywords: Executive Power; Populism; Democratic Backsliding; Institutional Resilience; Political Communication