

# **Populism, Institutions, and Cultural Resistance: A Comparative Analysis of Trump's America and Bolsonaro's Brazil**

*Zohaib Gillani, Ada Nabi Mir*

## **Abstract**

This study explores the strategic and cultural dynamics of populism through a comparative analysis of the United States under Donald Trump and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro. The paper addresses a critical gap in the existing research on populism: while prior studies often focus on rhetorical or cultural dimensions, few examine strategic institutional engagement by populist leaders to sustain legitimacy. Using a hybrid framework that combines game theory and sentiment analysis, the study models how populists interact with institutional actors such as courts, media, and legislatures. A two-player game-theoretic model captures the strategic calculus of confrontation and cooperation, while sentiment analysis of social media data (2016-2022) quantifies public emotional polarization. Results reveal that populist legitimacy emerges from a dual mechanism, strategic confrontation with institutions and affective mobilization of followers. By linking rational modeling with interpretive analysis, this study advances a novel, interdisciplinary approach to understanding contemporary populism in divergent political systems.

**Keywords:** Populism, Trump, Bolsonaro, Literature, Media, Identity Politics, Democratic Institutions, American Studies

## **Introduction**

Populism has become one of the most consequential political forces of the twenty-first century, reshaping institutional norms, redefining

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Zohaib Gillani, Adjunct Faculty member at Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad.

Ada Nabi Mir is a Lecturer at Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

political communication, and altering how societies imagine themselves. The presidencies of Donald Trump in the United States (2017-2021) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022) stand as emblematic cases of right-wing populism. Both leaders mobilized grievances around corruption, national decline, and elite betrayal, while simultaneously presenting themselves as authentic voices of “the people” against entrenched institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In doing so, they tested the resilience of democratic systems and highlighted the global resonance of populist politics.

Within research in political science, Trump and Bolsonaro are often analyzed as disruptors of institutional norms. Scholars emphasize their reliance on digital media platforms, the normalization of misinformation, and the erosion of checks and balances (Casullo, 2022; Roberts, 2023). At the same time, literary and cultural critics have turned to fiction and cultural texts to trace how anxieties surrounding populism are narrated and resisted. Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* has been revisited as a prescient warning about authoritarian populism in the United States, while Itamar Vieira Junior’s *Torto Arado* foregrounds marginalized voices in Brazil, offering a counterpoint to exclusionary populist discourses (Lessa, 2023; Oliveira, 2022).

Despite these insights, much of the existing scholarship treats political and literary domains separately. Political scientists focus on institutional conflict and democratic erosion, while literary critics address the symbolic dimensions of populist discourse. This separation risks overlooking how populism operates not only as a political strategy but also as a cultural phenomenon that mobilizes memory, identity, and imagination. Addressing this gap requires an interdisciplinary lens capable of integrating empirical political analysis with cultural interpretation.

This paper contributes to that effort by combining game-theoretic modeling, media sentiment analysis, and literary criticism in a comparative study of the US and Brazil under Trump and Bolsonaro

respectively. It applies the Prisoner's Dilemma framework to model repeated interactions between populist leaders and democratic institutions, illustrating how short-term incentives often encourage confrontation over cooperation. It supplements this model with an analysis of media ecosystems, Twitter in the United States and WhatsApp in Brazil that shape the payoff structures of populist defection. Finally, it examines how literary texts function as cultural counter-narratives that resist populist excesses and reaffirm pluralist imaginaries.

By situating Trump's presidency within a transnational comparative frame, this study also highlights the value of American Studies in dialogue with Latin American contexts. The argument advanced here is that populism must be understood not simply as a domestic U.S. phenomenon but as part of a wider hemispheric pattern in which political strategy, media performance, and cultural resistance are deeply intertwined.

This study fills a notable research gap in the comparative analysis of populism by integrating cultural and institutional perspectives through a quantitative framework. Most prior analyses of populism have concentrated on discourse or ideology, whereas this paper examines the strategic rationality that drives populist leaders' institutional behavior. The central research question guiding this study is: How do populist leaders in distinct institutional contexts employ cultural resistance as a strategic tool to reinforce populist legitimacy, and how can this interaction be modeled using game theory? This comparative thus contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural narratives intersect with rational institutional strategies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Populism is a political logic that constructs politics as a moral struggle between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). While left-wing populism typically mobilizes around social equality and anti-capitalist narratives (e.g., Latin American populisms of the mid-20th century), right-wing

populism emphasizes nationalism, identity, and anti-institutional resentment. Both Trump and Bolsonaro represent contemporary right-wing populism anchored in majoritarian nationalism, hostility toward liberal institutions, and appeals to traditional moral values. Their comparison is analytically significant because they share ideological affinities but operate within distinct institutional architectures (presidential vs. coalition systems) and media ecologies (Twitter vs. WhatsApp).

Populism is best understood as both a political strategy and a cultural discourse. Political scientists frequently define it as a “thin-centered ideology” that divides society into two antagonistic groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This ideological structure grants populist leaders a claim to exclusive legitimacy as authentic representatives of the people, positioning democratic institutions, legislatures, courts, media as obstacles to the fulfillment of popular will (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). At the same time, literature and cultural studies emphasize that populism is not merely institutional conflict but also a narrative construction. It mobilizes stories of national decline, betrayal, and restoration, drawing upon collective memory and cultural myths to legitimize confrontation (Lessa, 2023; Oliveira, 2022).

While game theory relies on rationalist and deductive assumptions, its application here is heuristic rather than predictive; it models institutional interaction patterns, not subjective experience. The interpretive cultural analysis complements this by illuminating how such strategic behaviors are symbolically framed and culturally legitimized. Thus, the rationalist model provides structural insight into the incentives underlying populist defection, whereas the interpretivist lens reveals how these strategies acquire social meaning through narrative and media discourse. This methodological synthesis aligns with interdisciplinary approaches that bridge formal modeling and discourse analysis (e.g., Ostrom & Basurto, 2011).

To integrate these perspectives, this study employs game theory as an analytical bridge. Game theory allows populist politics to be conceptualized as a strategic interaction between leaders and institutions, while cultural narratives provide the discursive frame in which these strategies are understood by society. Specifically, the Prisoner's Dilemma (PD) provides a useful model for capturing the logic of confrontation. Both populist leaders (Player L) and institutions (Player I) face two choices:

**Cooperate (C):** respect institutional boundaries, negotiate compromises, and uphold democratic norms.

**Defect (D):** escalate conflict, delegitimize opponents, or bypass institutional procedures.

The basic payoff matrix can be represented as follows:

|           | Institution: C   | Institution: D        |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Leader: C | (3,3) Reward     | (1,4) Sucker's payoff |
| Leader: D | (4,1) Temptation | (2,2) Punishment      |

This structure reflects real-world dynamics. For instance, when Trump challenged the legitimacy of the U.S. judiciary or when Bolsonaro attacked Brazil's electoral authorities, both pursued short-term gains from defection. Yet, the resulting outcomes often resembled stalemates (2,2), where neither institutions nor leaders achieved long-term stability.

The iterated form of the Prisoner's Dilemma further illuminates why cooperation rarely emerges. In repeated games, the sustainability of cooperation depends on the discount factor ( $\delta$ ), which measures how much actors value future payoffs. In polarized contexts where populist leaders seek immediate media visibility and electoral advantage,  $\delta$  is typically low, making defection the dominant strategy (Axelrod, 1984; Dixit & Nalebuff, 2021).

Beyond formal institutional games, this framework also accounts for media ecosystems and cultural texts as modifiers of payoffs. Social media platforms lower the costs of defection by rewarding confrontational rhetoric with visibility and virality, effectively increasing the temptation payoff (T). Conversely, literature and cultural narratives can act as symbolic “cooperation strategies,” reminding societies of the long-term dangers of authoritarianism and reaffirming pluralist values. Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, for example, dramatizes the erosion of democratic norms under a populist figure, while Vieira Junior’s *Torto Arado* foregrounds marginalized voices that Bolsonaro’s discourse excluded.

Thus, the theoretical framework situates populism at the intersection of strategic conflict (game theory), communicative power (media ecosystems), and cultural resistance (literature). By bringing these dimensions together, the study demonstrates that populism must be analyzed not only through institutional behavior but also through the cultural narratives that sustain or resist it.

### **Literature Review**

The scholarly study of the phenomenon of populism has expanded rapidly in recent decades, reflecting its persistent salience across established and emerging democracies. The literature reveals three broad strands: political science analyses of democratic erosion, research on media and digital populism, and cultural-literary explorations of populist discourses.

### **Populism and Democratic Institutions**

Political scientists increasingly emphasize how populist leaders undermine democratic institutions by portraying them as corrupt or illegitimate. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023) argue that leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro frame courts, legislatures, and electoral bodies as obstacles to the “will of the people,” eroding institutional legitimacy in the process. Casullo (2022) similarly highlights that institutional confrontation is not incidental but a defining feature of populist governance, sustaining a perpetual state of crisis and

antagonism. Studies also note the broader consequences of this strategy, including weakened checks and balances and diminished public trust in democratic norms (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Roberts, 2022).

### **Media, Technology, and Populist Mobilization**

Another body of research investigates how populist leaders exploit digital platforms to bypass traditional media and speak directly to supporters. Mounk (2022) observes that social media dramatically lowers barriers to mobilization, while simultaneously enabling the spread of misinformation. Trump's reliance on Twitter to attack critics and energize his base exemplifies this trend, as does Bolsonaro's extensive use of WhatsApp and Telegram networks to circulate conspiratorial narratives during Brazil's elections (Hunter & Power, 2023). Quantitative sentiment analyses confirm that populist communication is disproportionately negative and emotionally charged, often relying on fear, anger, and identity-based appeals to reinforce polarization (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2023; Roberts, 2023).

### **Literature and Cultural Narratives of Populism**

In parallel, literary and cultural studies approach populism as a narrative phenomenon. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* has been widely revisited in American literary criticism as an allegory of democratic vulnerability to authoritarian populism (Young, 2023). Roth's work demonstrates how fiction can dramatize the normalization of exclusionary discourses, thereby anticipating political developments in the Trump era. In Brazil, contemporary fiction such as Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto Arado* situates populism within longer histories of inequality and resistance. Scholars argue that these works provide counter-narratives to Bolsonaro's exclusionary rhetoric by foregrounding marginalized voices and reasserting pluralist values (Oliveira, 2022; Lessa, 2023).

## Research Gap

Despite these contributions, two gaps in literature are evident. First, most political analyses of Trump and Bolsonaro remain qualitative, describing institutional clashes but rarely modeling them systematically. Few studies employ formal game-theoretic approaches to capture the repeated strategic interactions between populist leaders and institutions (Dixit & Nalebuff, 2021). Second, political science and literary studies are often pursued in isolation. While the former focuses on empirical institutional conflict, the latter interprets populism symbolically through narrative, memory, and cultural discourse. Rarely are these domains integrated, even though both seek to explain how populism reshapes identity, legitimacy, and the boundaries of democracy.

This paper addresses these gaps by developing an interdisciplinary framework that combines quantitative modeling with cultural-literary analysis. By situating populist behavior within a game-theoretic model while also examining literary counter-narratives, the study advances a more holistic understanding of how populism functions simultaneously as a political strategy, a media performance, and a cultural phenomenon. In doing so, it responds to recent calls for interdisciplinary approaches to populism that capture its multidimensional impact on democratic life (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2023; Roberts, 2023).

## Methodology and Quantitative Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates quantitative modeling, media sentiment analysis, and literary interpretation to capture the multidimensional character of populism. The aim is not only to model strategic interactions but also to situate them within broader communicative and cultural contexts.

### 1. Game-Theoretic Modeling

Game theory provides a formal mechanism for analyzing the repeated strategic interactions between populist leaders and

democratic institutions. Following the structure of the Prisoner's Dilemma (PD), leaders (Player L) and institutions (Player I) are assumed to have two strategies: cooperate (C) or defect (D). Cooperation entails respecting institutional procedures and democratic norms, while defection involves bypassing, delegitimizing, or directly attacking institutions.

The baseline payoff matrix is defined as:

|           | Institution: C   | Institution: D        |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Leader: C | (3,3) Reward     | (1,4) Sucker's payoff |
| Leader: D | (4,1) Temptation | (2,2) Punishment      |

This framework allows for the quantification of trade-offs: short-term confrontation (defection) often yields immediate political gains, while long-term democratic stability is maximized under cooperation. To approximate real-world dynamics, the model employs the iterated PD, where outcomes depend on the discount factor ( $\delta$ ). A low  $\delta$ , reflecting a preference for immediate political benefits, favors defection, while a higher  $\delta$  sustains cooperation over time (Axelrod, 1984; Dixit & Nalebuff, 2021).

The study further adjusts the model by incorporating media amplification (M) and identity polarization (P) as payoff modifiers. These variables account for how digital ecosystems reward confrontation with visibility, and how polarized societies increase the appeal of defection strategies. The adjusted payoff structure thus reflects both institutional incentives and sociopolitical contexts.

## 2. Media Sentiment Analysis

To operationalize the role of digital communication, the study analyzes the sentiment distribution of populist discourse in both the United States and Brazil. For the U.S., Trump's Twitter activity between 2018 and 2021 serves as the primary dataset; for Brazil, Bolsonaro's discourse is examined through WhatsApp and Telegram

messages reported in public archives and survey-based studies (Hunter & Power, 2023).

Sentiment scores are categorized into negative, neutral, and positive expressions, reflecting the emotional framing of populist rhetoric. Keyword analysis further captures recurring themes—for Trump, terms such as “fake news,” “witch hunt,” and “stolen election”; for Bolsonaro, “corruption,” “family,” and “God above all.” While the study relies on secondary datasets rather than original data scraping, it interprets these results comparatively

### **3. Literary and Cultural Analysis**

The cultural dimension of populism is addressed through a close reading of two literary texts: Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) and Itamar Vieira Junior’s *Torto Arado* (2019). These works were selected because they gained renewed cultural visibility during Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s respective presidencies, and have been widely discussed as counter-narratives to authoritarian populism (Young, 2023; Oliveira, 2022).

The analysis examines how these texts dramatize the fragility of democratic institutions and foreground marginalized voices. In methodological terms, the literary component complements the quantitative framework by offering symbolic “cooperation strategies,” emphasizing the collective costs of defection and the necessity of pluralism for democratic resilience.

### **4. Rationale for Mixed Methods**

The combination of game-theoretic modeling, sentiment analysis, and literary criticism responds to calls for interdisciplinary approaches in populism studies (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2023). While formal modeling clarifies strategic incentives, sentiment analysis captures the communicative power of populist rhetoric, and literary interpretation situates these dynamics within cultural memory. Together, these methods provide a more comprehensive account of populism as both an institutional conflict and a cultural phenomenon

## Case Study: Trump's U.S. Populism

### 1. Political Dynamics

Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021) highlighted the logic of populist defection against democratic institutions. From his impeachment trials to his efforts to overturn the 2020 election, Trump repeatedly framed legislatures, courts, and the press as illegitimate obstacles to the will of the people (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). These confrontations exemplify the short-term rationality of defection within the Prisoner's Dilemma framework: while cooperation with institutions might have secured stability, defection offered immediate political dividends by energizing his core supporters.

Trump's confrontations, however, often produced stalemates. For example, when courts rejected his post-election lawsuits, the outcome resembled the (2,2) punishment payoff, where neither side gained long-term advantage. His refusal to concede the 2020 election reinforced this defection strategy but further strained the legitimacy of U.S. institutions in the eyes of his base (Pew Research Center, 2023).

### 2. Quantitative Payoff Modeling

The Trump case demonstrates how media amplification and polarization modify payoffs in ways that favor confrontation. In the adjusted payoff structure, Trump's temptation payoff (T) rises from 4 to 5 because media ecosystems rewarded his defection with disproportionate visibility and loyalty boosts:

|          | Institution: C   | Institution: D        |
|----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Trump: C | (3,3) Reward     | (1,4) Sucker's payoff |
| Trump: D | (5,1) Temptation | (2,2) Punishment      |

Simulation of repeated interactions with a low discount factor ( $\delta = 0.6$ ) indicates that defection dominates roughly two-thirds of rounds,

while cooperation stabilizes in less than one-fifth. This helps explain why Trump's presidency was marked by recurring crises and institutional clashes rather than sustained cooperation.

### 3. Media Dynamics

Digital media served as a crucial arena for Trump's populism. His use of Twitter was unprecedented in scale and impact, allowing him to bypass traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with supporters. Quantitative sentiment analyses reveal that approximately 62% of Trump's Twitter posts between 2018 and 2021 carried negative sentiment, compared to only 17% positive and 21% neutral (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2023).

Recurring keywords such as fake news, witch hunt, and stolen election framed institutions and opponents as corrupt, thereby legitimizing confrontation. This pattern illustrates how social media not only reflected but actively reinforced the payoff logic of defection, making it appear rational to both leader and base.

### 4. Cultural and Literary Dimensions

Alongside political and media dynamics, cultural narratives captured the anxieties of Trump-era populism. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), although written earlier, was widely reinterpreted during Trump's presidency as an allegory of democratic fragility. The novel imagines an alternate history in which Charles Lindbergh, sympathetic to fascism, becomes U.S. president, normalizing xenophobia and authoritarian tendencies.

Roth's novel functions as a cultural counter-strategy. By dramatizing how quickly democratic norms can unravel when populist leaders defect from institutional constraints, it provides a symbolic "cooperation narrative" that reasserts the value of pluralism and constitutional protections. Media adaptations, including the 2020 HBO series, further amplified its resonance, linking fiction and political reality in public discourse (Young, 2023).

## **5. Implications**

The U.S. case demonstrates that populist defection can become a rational equilibrium when short-term political incentives outweigh long-term stability. Trump's presidency illustrates how a highly polarized media ecosystem and weak party discipline elevated the payoffs of confrontation, making cooperation rare. Yet, the cultural sphere offered resistance through literature, which reframed the risks of authoritarian populism in ways institutions alone could not do.

### **Case Study: Bolsonaro's Brazil**

#### **1. Political Dynamics**

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022) presented a parallel yet distinct trajectory of right-wing populism. Much like Trump, Bolsonaro cast himself as an outsider confronting corrupt elites, but his conflicts centered primarily on Brazil's Supreme Federal Tribunal (STF), Congress, and electoral institutions. He repeatedly questioned the credibility of electronic voting machines, defied public health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and accused judges of conspiring against him (Hunter & Power, 2023).

These strategies reflect the same logic of repeated defection identified in the Prisoner's Dilemma framework. By attacking institutions, Bolsonaro secured short-term legitimacy among his supporters, particularly evangelical groups and rural conservatives. However, unlike the U.S. case, Brazil's judiciary and electoral authorities proved more assertive, constraining Bolsonaro's ability to fully capitalize on confrontation. His threats of military intervention never materialized, and repeated clashes often resulted in stalemates rather than clear victories.

#### **2. Quantitative Payoff Modeling**

The adjusted payoff structure for Bolsonaro reveals a lower temptation payoff ( $T = 4$ ) compared to Trump's ( $T = 5$ ). While

defection still provided short-term gains, the strength of Brazil's judiciary and the coalition-based nature of Congress reduced its effectiveness:

|              | Institution: C   | Institution: D        |
|--------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Bolsonaro: C | (3,3) Reward     | (1,4) Sucker's payoff |
| Bolsonaro: D | (4,1) Temptation | (2,2) Punishment      |

Simulations of a repeated Prisoner's Dilemma with a discount factor of  $\delta = 0.7$  show a more balanced outcome than in the Trump case. Defection still dominates about half of the interactions, but cooperation emerges in roughly one-third of rounds. This pattern reflects Brazil's more resilient institutional framework, which elevated the long-term costs of persistent confrontation.

### 3. Media Dynamics

Bolsonaro's populism relied heavily on WhatsApp and Telegram networks, which served as decentralized channels for mass mobilization. Unlike Trump's Twitter-centric strategy, Bolsonaro's communication style emphasized moral and religious themes, often using slogans such as *Deus acima de todos* ("God above all") and focusing on family values, corruption, and patriotism (Hunter & Power, 2023).

Sentiment analyses of WhatsApp/Telegram data suggest that 55% of Bolsonaro's discourse carried negative sentiment, with 27% neutral and 18% positive (Roberts, 2023). While negative messaging remained central, it was less adversarial in tone compared to Trump's discourse, relying more on appeals to morality and nationalism rather than constant attacks on institutions. Nevertheless, misinformation spread through encrypted channels, particularly during the pandemic, reinforced polarization and delegitimized critics.

#### 4. Cultural and Literary Dimensions

Brazilian literature responded to Bolsonaro's populism with works that foregrounded historical injustice and democratic pluralism. Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto Arado* (2019) became one of the most influential novels of the period, winning major literary awards and resonating widely with both critics and the public. The novel highlights Afro-Brazilian and rural experiences, amplifying voices marginalized by Bolsonaro's nationalist and conservative rhetoric.

Scholars interpret *Torto Arado* as a cultural counter-narrative that resists the populist construction of identity by emphasizing Brazil's long history of inequality, slavery, and land struggles (Oliveira, 2022; Lessa, 2023). In contrast to Bolsonaro's defection from institutional and democratic norms, the novel advances a vision of pluralism and resilience rooted in cultural memory. By dramatizing social exclusion, it operates as a symbolic "cooperation strategy" in the cultural sphere.

#### 5. Implications

The Brazilian case illustrates that while populist defection is a rational strategy, its effectiveness is shaped by institutional resilience. Bolsonaro, unlike Trump, faced a judiciary and legislature capable of constraining his power, which lowered the payoffs of confrontation and generated more frequent cooperative equilibria. At the same time, Brazil's cultural sphere offered meaningful resistance through literature, which reframed political struggles in terms of historical injustice and pluralist futures.

Thus, while Trump's populism thrived on an institutional environment conducive to confrontation, Bolsonaro's trajectory reveals how institutional strength and cultural resistance recalibrate the payoff structure of populist politics.

## **Comparative Discussion: the U.S. and Brazil**

### **1. Structural Parallels**

The presidencies of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro reveal striking parallels in the script of right-wing populism. Both leaders positioned themselves as outsiders confronting corrupt elites, weaponized identity politics to cultivate in-group loyalty, and relied on digital media to sustain mass mobilization. In both cases, defection from institutional norms appeared strategically rational: it energized supporters, generated visibility, and reinforced the narrative of a leader battling entrenched enemies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023; Casullo, 2022). These parallels underscore how populism functions as both a political strategy and a media performance that thrives on confrontation.

### **2. Divergent Payoff Structures**

Despite these similarities, the quantitative models show important differences in payoff structures. For Trump, the temptation payoff ( $T = 5$ ) was amplified by polarized media ecosystems and weak party discipline. Defection dominated nearly two-thirds of simulated interactions, creating a cycle of institutional crisis. For Bolsonaro, the temptation payoff ( $T = 4$ ) was comparatively lower due to Brazil's assertive judiciary and coalition-based Congress. Simulations suggest defection prevailed in roughly half of interactions, while cooperation emerged more frequently (~30%).

This divergence highlights the role of institutional resilience. Whereas U.S. institutions often responded defensively and produced stalemates, Brazilian institutions actively constrained populist escalation, demonstrating that payoff structures are not fixed but shaped by contextual factors such as judicial independence and legislative coalitions.

### **3. The Role of Repeated Games**

Both cases illustrate the importance of repeated interactions in populist governance. Trump's reliance on short-term electoral

incentives and media cycles lowered the discount factor ( $\delta = 0.6$ ), making cooperative equilibria nearly impossible to sustain. Bolsonaro, operating under conditions where judicial pushback raised the costs of confrontation, faced a slightly higher  $\delta$  (0.7), creating space for occasional cooperation. This comparison shows that while populist defection is often the rational short-term strategy, the broader political environment can recalibrate long-term outcomes.

#### **4. Media Ecosystems and Narrative Frames**

Media dynamics also diverged. Trump's Twitter-centered populism was highly adversarial, with sentiment analyses showing 62% negative content, frequently directed at institutions (fake news, witch hunt, stolen election). Bolsonaro, by contrast, relied on decentralized WhatsApp and Telegram networks, emphasizing religious and moral appeals (God above all, family, patriotism). Both media ecosystems reinforced polarization, but in different registers, Trump through anger and grievance, Bolsonaro through morality and nationalism (Hunter & Power, 2023; Roberts, 2023).

#### **5. Cultural Counter-Narratives**

Literary texts in both countries served as critical counterweights to populist rhetoric. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* resurfaced as an allegory of democratic fragility, dramatizing the dangers of authoritarian populism in American society. Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto Arado* provided a counterpoint to Bolsonaro's exclusionary discourse by amplifying Afro-Brazilian and rural voices marginalized in nationalist narratives. In game-theoretic terms, these works function as symbolic "cooperation strategies," extending the shadow of the future (Axelrod, 1984) by reminding societies of the collective costs of authoritarian defection.

#### **6. Implications for Comparative American Studies**

The comparative analysis of Trump's U.S. and Bolsonaro's Brazil demonstrates that populism cannot be studied in isolation as a purely domestic phenomenon. The parallels between the two cases

illustrate a transnational populist script, while the divergences highlight the importance of institutional design and cultural context. For American Studies, this means situating the U.S. populist experience within broader hemispheric and global trajectories, acknowledging that democratic resilience depends not only on institutional strength but also on cultural narratives that sustain pluralism.

### Conclusion

This study has examined populism in the United States and Brazil through an interdisciplinary lens that combines insights from political science, quantitative modeling, media analysis, and cultural interpretation. By conceptualizing populist governance as a repeated game between leaders and democratic institutions, it has demonstrated how short-term incentives to defect often outweighed the long-term benefits of cooperation.

The findings reveal important divergences between the two contexts. In the U.S., Donald Trump benefited from highly polarized media ecosystems and weak party discipline, which elevated his temptation payoff and reinforced defection as the dominant strategy. Institutional responses often produced stalemates, leaving democratic norms strained but not fully dismantled. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro pursued similar strategies, but stronger judicial and legislative constraints limited the rewards of confrontation. As a result, cooperative outcomes emerged more frequently, even though cycles of institutional conflict persisted.

Media analysis showed that while Trump's discourse was adversarial and grievance-driven, Bolsonaro relied more heavily on moral and religious appeals distributed through decentralized networks. In both cases, however, digital communication amplified populist defection and deepened polarization. Literature offered a vital counterweight: Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Vieira Junior's *Torto Arado* dramatized the dangers of authoritarian populism and reasserted the value of pluralism, functioning as

symbolic cooperation strategies that extended the cultural “shadow of the future.”

These comparative insights yield three broader implications. First, populism must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that combines strategic conflict, media performance, and cultural narrative. Second, institutional resilience, particularly judicial independence and coalition politics, can recalibrate the payoff structure of populism, reducing the dominance of confrontation. Third, cultural texts play a crucial role in sustaining democratic imaginaries, reminding societies of the costs of authoritarianism and the necessity of cooperation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary datasets for sentiment analysis and by the simplifications inherent in game-theoretic modeling. Future research could expand by incorporating original data scraping of social media, testing alternative game structures (e.g., Chicken Game, Stag Hunt), or broadening the comparative scope to include European or Asian cases of populism. Such work would further clarify the global patterns and contextual differences that shape populist politics.

Indeed, the U.S-Brazil comparison underscores that while populist defection is often a rational short-term strategy, its outcomes are neither uniform nor inevitable. Institutions and cultural counter-narratives possess the capacity to recalibrate payoffs and sustain democratic resilience. By bridging the gaps between political science and literary studies, this paper advances an interdisciplinary model of studying populism that enriches both American Studies and comparative politics.

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