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Political realignment and democratic setbacks: The rightward shift in India, the USA, and Italy

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Abstract

This research examines the rise of right-wing political forces in India, the United States, and Italy during the 21st century, emphasizing the leadership paradigms of Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, and Giorgia Meloni. It scrutinizes how nationalism, identity-driven rhetoric, and populist discourse exacerbated by socio-economic volatility, shifting cultural norms, and adept media manipulation have propelled right-wing ascendancy. Despite disparate historical contexts, converging patterns emerge: erosion of democratic norms, societal polarization, and the elevation of majoritarian identities. Utilizing a comparative case study framework, this study reveals the globalized dimensions and democratic implications of contemporary right-wing political reconfigurations.

Keywords: Democracy, Nationalism, right-wing populism, identity politics

Introduction

The global political landscape has experienced a significant reorientation with the resurgence of right-wing ideologies, characterized by fervent nationalism, populist rhetoric, and identity-centric narratives. This phenomenon has manifested robustly in diverse democracies such as India, the United States, and Italy, where conservative forces have substantially reshaped political discourses and institutional configurations.

In India, the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi represents a pivotal transformation, driven by a synthesis of neoliberal economic reforms and culturally infused majoritarian politics, notably advancing a Hindu nationalist agenda (Maitra, 2023) [28]. The United States witnessed a dramatic escalation of right-wing populism with Donald Trump's electoral victory, fueled by economic discontent, anti-immigrant sentiments, and growing disenchantment with traditional political establishments.

Similarly, Italy's political dynamics have shifted with the rise of the Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, who has leveraged themes such as sovereignty and immigration control to mobilize nationalist support.

Research Questions:

1. What political, societal, economic, and cultural dynamics have contributed to the emergence and consolidation of right-wing movements in India, the United States, and Italy?
2. How do the leadership approaches, tactical frameworks, and populist messaging of right-wing actors differ across these nations, and in what ways have they influenced political narratives and policy-making?
3. To what extent have digital media particularly social networking platforms shaped the dissemination of right-wing ideologies, and what has been their impact on democratic practices, institutional integrity, and the rights of minority groups in these countries?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the underlying socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that have facilitated the growth of right-wing movements in India, the United States, and Italy.
2. To evaluate the leadership styles, rhetorical strategies, and media usage of key right-wing figures such as Modi, Trump, and Meloni and their influence on public opinion and policy agendas.

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3. To analyze the consequences of right-wing governance for democratic norms, institutional integrity, minority protections, and national unity, while offering a comparative perspective on the evolution of these movements in different democratic contexts.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to investigate the proliferation of right-wing politics in India, the United States, and Italy from the 2010s onward. Relying on secondary sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, academic texts, and think tank reports it also integrates media analysis of speeches, interviews, party manifestos, and social media content. Utilizing thematic, discursive, and cross-case analytical techniques, the research identifies ideological patterns across key political events. Limitations include the lack of primary interviews and context-specific interpretations shaped by each nation's distinct political milieu.

Historical Context of Right-Wing Politics

Right-wing politics, traditionally anchored in nationalism, social hierarchy, institutional preservation, and resistance to radical change, has evolved across historical and geographical contexts. Its ideological roots can be traced to the French Revolution, where proponents of monarchy and established order opposed revolutionary upheaval, giving rise to the political dichotomy of "right" and "left" (Furet, 1996). Thinkers such as Edmund Burke espoused a philosophy of gradual reform and reverence for enduring institutions (Burke, 1790/2003) ^[6].

During the 19th century, conservative ideologies emerged in opposition to liberal and socialist currents, aligning with monarchist and aristocratic interests. Figures like Otto von Bismarck and Be NJAMIN Disraeli integrated modernization with conservative principles to ensure state continuity (Heywood, 2017) ^[20], often supported by religious institutions that defended traditional morality against secular influences (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) ^[32]. The 20th century saw the emergence of radical right-wing regimes, notably Italian fascism and German Nazism, marked by totalitarianism, nationalism, and ideological repression (Griffin, 1991) ^[16].

Post-World War II, right-wing politics adapted to new democratic paradigms. In the U.S., conservatism merged with anti-communist fervor, shaping a pro-market, limited government ideology advanced by leaders like Goldwater and Reagan (Critchlow, 2007) ^[10]. In Europe, Christian Democrats upheld conservative values within democratic frameworks. The late 20th century witnessed the ascendancy of neoliberalism, promoting privatization and diminished state intervention (Harvey, 2005) ^[19]. In the 21st century, populist right-wing figures like Trump, Modi, and Meloni have synthesized cultural conservatism with nationalism and anti-elite sentiment, amplified through digital media (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2019) ^[23, 30].

In India, right-wing currents stem from colonial resistance and Hindu revivalism. V.D. Savarkar's Hindutva laid the ideological foundation for Hindu nationalism (Savarkar, 1923/2003) ^[34], institutionalized by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 (Andersen & Damle, 1987) ^[3]. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), formed in 1951,

carried these ideas into politics, later evolving into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which surged during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Under Modi's leadership since 2014, the BJP has fused economic modernity with assertive cultural nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25].

In the U.S., conservatism developed through opposition to expansive federal power post-New Deal, becoming entrenched during the Cold War. Influenced by intellectuals like Buckley and political leaders like Reagan, it evolved into a powerful coalition of free-market, religious, and nationalist ideologies (Nash, 2006) ^[31]. Trump's rise in 2016 redefined American conservatism through populist, anti-globalist, and nationalist rhetoric (Hochschild, 2016) ^[22].

Italian right-wing politics traces back to monarchist and religious conservatism post-unification. Mussolini's fascist regime represented a major right-wing authoritarian experiment. Post-war, Christian Democracy dominated until the 1990s, when Berlusconi's populist coalition gained traction. In the 2010s, Salvini's Lega and Meloni's Brothers of Italy redefined right-wing discourse, culminating in Meloni's premiership in 2022.

Right-Wing Politics in India, the USA, and Italy (2010-2024): A Comparative Socio-Economic and Cultural Analysis

Between 2010 and 2024, right-wing politics gained significant momentum in India, the United States, and Italy, shaped by intersecting socio-economic anxieties, cultural insecurities, and charismatic leadership. Though ideologically distinct, these nations witnessed a convergence of economic discontent and identity-based grievances, enabling right-wing populism to flourish.

Socio-Economic Drivers and Populist Mobilization

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi harnessed aspirations of upward mobility amidst economic disillusionment. Despite substantial GDP growth, structural unemployment, particularly among youth, bred frustration (CMIE, 2020) ^[7]. Modi initially championed inclusive development, but disruptions like demonetization and GST implementation prompted a pivot toward Hindu nationalist rhetoric (Chatterji *et al.*, 2019) ^[9]. Cultural policies, such as the CAA and revocation of Article 370, deepened religious polarization, while welfare schemes were branded as patriotic efforts (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25].

In the U.S., Donald Trump's ascent drew upon economic stagnation and racial resentment. Deindustrialization and job loss post-2008 disproportionately impacted white, working-class Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016) ^[5]. Trump's narrative of decline blamed immigrants, elites, and globalists, while cultural backlash against liberal progressivism intensified racialized politics (Hochschild, 2016) ^[22]. The pandemic further polarized discourse, reinforcing anti-institutional sentiments (Gollust *et al.*, 2020; Tufekci, 2018) ^[15, 37]. Italy's trajectory was similarly shaped by economic stagnation, sovereign debt, and soaring youth unemployment (Eurostat, 2020) ^[11]. Leaders like Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni invoked nationalism and xenophobia, framing immigrants and EU bureaucracy as threats. Meloni's rise exemplified the reframing of post-fascist ideologies to appeal to economically marginalized and culturally anxious voters (Tarchi, 2022; Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018) ^[36, 1].

Cultural Identity and Nationalist Reassertion:

Right-wing momentum also stemmed from identity crises. Modi's Hindutva discourse invoked historical grievances and Hindu revivalism (Chatterji *et al.*, 2019) ^[9], while Trump's "Make America Great Again" mobilized those fearing cultural erosion. In Italy, Meloni and Salvini romanticized Christian heritage and opposed multiculturalism, tapping into anti-globalist sentiments (Tarchi, 2022) ^[36].

Leadership, Media, and Populist Performance:

Modi, Trump, and Meloni employed charismatic, media-savvy leadership to centralize authority and cultivate emotional appeal. Modi's self-made persona and media outreach reinforced his populist stature (Jaffrelot, 2021; Chakravarty & Roy, 2017) ^[25, 8]. Trump's provocative style and direct communication via social media reshaped political discourse (Ott, 2017; Mounk, 2018) ^[33, 29]. Meloni offered a strategic blend of ideological coherence and nationalistic symbolism, appealing across generations (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2022) ^[2].

Collectively, these leaders leveraged crises, identity fears, and populist narratives to consolidate power and challenge liberal democratic norms (Ben-Ghiat, 2020) ^[4]. Their success underscores the volatile synergy between economic despair and cultural insecurity in shaping contemporary right-wing politics.

The Effects of Right-Wing Politics on Democracy in India, the United States, and Italy (2010-2024): A Critical Synopsis

India: Centralization and Democratic Decline

India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has witnessed pronounced centralization of authority, raising alarms regarding democratic erosion. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has increasingly undermined institutional autonomy, with agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Enforcement Directorate (ED) frequently accused of selectively targeting political adversaries, compromising their neutrality (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25]. Judicial independence and electoral credibility have come under similar scrutiny. Furthermore, press freedom has markedly deteriorated, as dissenting journalists face surveillance, lawsuits, and digital harassment, leading to India's downward trajectory in global media freedom indices (Chakravarty & Roy, 2017) ^[8]. Civil society, particularly foreign-funded NGOs, encounters legislative restrictions under laws such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), curbing activism. While Modi's proponents emphasize administrative efficiency through schemes like Digital India and Swachh Bharat (Kohli, 2022) ^[26], such advancements are counterbalanced by escalating religious polarization that threatens India's secular democratic foundation.

United States: Institutional Resilience amid Polarization

Donald Trump's presidency posed a formidable test for American democratic norms. His combative rhetoric, disdain for institutional oversight, and refusal to accept the 2020 electoral outcome culminated in the Capitol insurrection, spotlighting the perils of demagogic populism and disinformation (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) ^[27]. Nonetheless, democratic safeguards proved robust courts invalidated baseless fraud allegations, and electoral administrators upheld process integrity (Ginsburg & Huq,

2018) ^[14]. High voter turnout in 2020 reflected enduring civic engagement. Yet, the sociopolitical landscape grew increasingly fragmented. Trump's cultivation of identity-based grievances rooted in race, immigration and gender exacerbated societal fissures and obstructed bipartisan cooperation (Hochschild, 2016) ^[22].

Italy: Democratic Continuity with Authoritarian Undercurrents:

Italy's democratic institutions remain intact under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, though her administration reflects nuanced authoritarian tendencies. Leading Fratelli d'Italia, a party with post-fascist origins, Meloni employs nationalist rhetoric and traditionalist values to address economic and cultural anxieties (Tarchi, 2022) ^[36]. While respecting formal democratic procedures, her stringent immigration policies and confrontations with NGOs and the press provoke fears of restricted civic freedoms (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2022) ^[2]. Nevertheless, Meloni's coherent governance has stabilized Italy's historically turbulent politics, suggesting that democratic systems can persist under ideologically rigid leadership albeit tenuously. In short right-wing regimes in these democracies have reshaped governance by weakening checks and balances, deepening sociocultural cleavages, and exploiting media ecosystems. Modi, Trump, and Meloni have all sought to delegitimize opposition by framing critics as traitors or elite conspirators. Their manipulation of media be it Modi's alliance with pro-government outlets, Trump's weaponization of social platforms, or Meloni's curated online persona undermines pluralistic discourse and distorts public perception (Ott, 2017) ^[33], threatening the very ethos of liberal democracy.

Comparative Analysis: Rise of right-wing politics in India, the USA, and Italy

Nationalism

Nationalism serves as the ideological cornerstone of right-wing ascendancy in India, the United States, and Italy, though it assumes different cultural and political expressions. In India, Narendra Modi promotes a brand of nationalism steeped in Hindu majoritarianism, exemplified by initiatives such as the abrogation of Article 370 and the Citizenship Amendment Act policies that reinforce a Hindu-centric national identity (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25]. Conversely, Donald Trump espoused an exclusionary form of nationalism rooted in nostalgia for a white, Christian-dominated past. His "America First" doctrine emphasized economic insularity, immigration curbs, and retreat from global commitments (Hochschild, 2016) ^[22]. Giorgia Meloni in Italy champions a cultural nationalism centered on Christian traditions, familial values, and skepticism toward supranational entities like the European Union, portraying them as threats to Italian sovereignty (Tarchi, 2022) ^[36].

Populism

All three leaders utilize populist narratives to galvanize support. Modi positions himself as an ascetic reformer and outsider challenging entrenched elites, often contrasting the "pure" majority with religious minorities and dissenters (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25]. Trump's populism was overtly adversarial; he framed himself as a victim of deep-state machinations while discrediting institutional checks and branding the press and judiciary as enemies of the people (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) ^[27]. Meloni's approach is more

strategic and less inflammatory. She portrays herself as a defender of Italian heritage, identifying European bureaucrats, immigrants, and liberal elites as threats, all while maintaining ideological discipline.

Media Strategy

Modi employs state-aligned platforms and digital outreach to control public discourse, utilizing programs like *Mann Ki Baat* and tools like NaMo TV to speak directly to citizens (Chakravartty & Roy, 2017) ^[8]. Trump revolutionized political communication through Twitter, using it to bypass traditional media, provoke controversy, and sustain visibility. Meloni curates a composed digital presence, balancing populist messaging with a measured tone, enhancing her appeal among both conservatives and centrists (Tarchi, 2022) ^[36].

Policy Focus

Modi merges neoliberal reforms such as the GST and digital infrastructure with welfare populism and religious undertones (Kohli, 2022) ^[26]. Trump advanced economic nationalism, tax cuts, and anti-immigration policies. Meloni, while rhetorically combative, has pursued cautious economic policies and cultural conservatism, blending nationalist ideals with pragmatic governance.

Conclusion

Between 2010 and 2024, the ascendancy of right-wing politics in India, the United States, and Italy signified a profound transformation in democratic governance. Leaders like Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, and Giorgia Meloni have effectively harnessed nationalism, populism, media manipulation, and targeted policy agendas to consolidate authority and redefine democratic norms.

- **Nationalism emerges as a cornerstone of this shift:** Modi's Hindu-centric vision (Jaffrelot, 2021) ^[25], Trump's nostalgia for white Christian dominance (Hochschild, 2016) ^[22], and Meloni's cultural traditionalism rooted in Christian values (Tarchi, 2022) ^[36] collectively illustrate exclusionary ideologies that marginalize minorities and promote homogenous national identities.
- **Populism underpins each leader's narrative:** Modi presents himself as a humble reformer combating corrupt elites, Trump's belligerent style frames him as a victim of institutional conspiracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) ^[27], while Meloni adopts a restrained yet ideologically potent approach. All position "the people" against an allegedly disconnected elite, exacerbating polarization.
- **Media Strategy plays a critical role:** Modi utilizes state-friendly platforms (Chakravartty & Roy, 2017) ^[8], Trump relied on Twitter for unfiltered outreach, and Meloni cultivates a controlled, relatable digital persona, and policy focus across these regimes emphasizes economic sovereignty, cultural conservatism, and institutional centralization, collectively eroding democratic safeguards and fostering an authoritarian drift within democratic frameworks.

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