

AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF VLADIMIR PUTIN'S AND DONALD TRUMP'S PERSONALITY CULTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how successful Putin and Trump's personality cults were in consolidating authoritarianism in their respective regimes, Russia and the US, during periods of democratic erosion, known as democratic backsliding. My research investigates how both leaders' authoritarian consolidation is dependent on their regime type and conditions. This is because the existing institutions and political frameworks of a regime either adopt or reject their personality cults, enabling or limiting the success of their authoritarian consolidation. Also, the success of each cult's authoritarian consolidation is dependent on the leaders' abilities to navigate and respond to opposition and conflict, which determines their cult disintegration or survival. My research builds a contemporary theoretical framework of modern personality cults and uses a comparative case study to analyse Putin and Trump's consolidations of authoritarianism through personality cult institutionalisation and democratic backsliding. My results demonstrate that Putin's cult has successfully consolidated authoritarianism in Russia by using the regime's existing frameworks to advance his personality cult and pre-emptively limit oppositional activity. In contrast, during his presidency, Trump's cult did not successfully consolidate authoritarianism in the US, because his cult was consistently undermined by the existing democratic institutions and hindered by both internal and external political contestation.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of global politics is changing, and new global trends are on the rise. In its most recent report (2022), watchdog organisation Freedom House alerted international communities of the 16th consecutive year of growing authoritarianism and the widespread deterioration of democracy. Although authoritarianism isn't a novel concept, this contemporary trend is alarming. It suggests new societal norms and standards, in which democratic tradition is replaced by unregulated abuses of power and the decay of human rights (Oliker, 2017; Rees, 2005; Repucci and Slipotitz, 2021). This is where my research begins: with a desire to understand the nature and global rise of authoritarianism; specifically, I am compelled to understand how authoritarian leaders employ existing democratic institutions to consolidate their centralised power. My research investigates the tools used by authoritarian leaders to consolidate authoritarianism and regress democratic practice.

Existing literature suggests authoritarianism is consolidated through various legitimacy claims, including identity-, procedural-, and performance-based claims. My research is focused on identity-based legitimacy, specifically personalism (legitimacy claimed through public adulation of a leader), because of the urgency to confront the challenges and changes occurring as the global number of highly personalise regimes increases (Hill et al., 2021; Taussig, 2017; Soest and Grauvogel, 2017). According to Freedom House (2022), not only are traditionally more autocratic-leaning regimes solidifying personalist styled politics, but even fully consolidated democracies are eroding under authoritarian pressure.

Because of this international urgency and necessity to understand the mechanisms of personalist leaderships, my research studies how both autocratic and democratic leaders employ personality cults for political consolidation. In other words, my research evaluates how and to what success do contemporary leaders use personality cults to consolidate authoritarianism in their regimes during democratic backsliding.

At the core of my research, I use historian Rees' (2004) leader cult definition to conceptualise the nature and purpose of contemporary personality cults. Leader cults, like personality cults, are a widespread and organised 'system of veneration', surrounding a political leader, where all members of society endorse and adhere to the leader's aims and policies. Most often, leader cults form in politically centralised and socially repressed societies and emerge in societies transitioning towards authoritarianism; however, leader cults can also cultivate in 'relatively open, democratic political systems' where leader cults form around charismatic individuals and offices. Furthermore, contemporary literature suggests that personality cults develop in a diverse range of varying social, historical, and institutional contexts and are not exclusive to a single type of regime or society (Crabtree et al., 2020; Kostadinova and Levitt, 2014; Altman, 2020). Also, compared to pre-modern cults, contemporary personality cults target entire populations, rather than a selected elite, and are based on modern concepts of secularism (Hoffmann, 2013).

Leader and personality cults form to cater to both the leader's and their followers' political and personal needs. Firstly, the leader employs their cult to mediate a relationship between the political elite and public. Their cult acts as a signalling tool to intimidate opposition, improve their legitimacy, and, occasionally, to encourage follower conformity by propagating and manufacturing false 'pseudo-personality cults' (Tucker, 1977) (Huang, 2015; Rees, 2004). Also, leaders use cults to ease their insecurities and 'psychological needs' (Crabtree et al., 2020) through public devotion and favouring propaganda (Rees, 2004).

The widespread codification of a leader's values, objectives, and 'mission' (Lu and Soboleva, 2014) into a regime's working institutions and systems to propagate the public into psychological conformity and cult practice is known as cult institutionalisation (Lu and Soboleva, 2014). Personality cult institutionalisation is significant, because it is a vital process needed for the survival of a personalist authoritarian regime. More specifically, the leader's political success is dependent on

public legitimacy and support. Therefore, by codifying the leader's aim and character into the regime's existing frameworks, the leader's politics become prioritised, legitimized, and adopted by their regime's institutions and actors. This guarantees a regime's preservation and the cult's institutional support (Burkhard, 2020; Rose et al., 2011; Strong and Killingsworth, 2011). Personality cult institutionalisation is significant to my research, because it exemplifies how leaders integrate themselves into society, guaranteeing the institutional success of their political advancements and cult support.

Secondly, cults form to satisfy the followers' political and personal needs. In societies where the leader uses repressive strategies of 'domination based on compliance rather than legitimacy' (Wedeen, 1999), followers participate in cult activity to achieve political security and leverage and escape political pressure, isolation, and intimidation (Rees, 2004). Similarly, a leader's coercive methods and repression encourages excessive adulation in a cult; followers use flattery and endorsement to improve their own political status in relation with the leader, hoping to gain political benefits and upstage other supporters (Crabtree et al., 2018). Additionally, followers join cults to improve their lives and find greater meaning and achievement through shared cult experience and practice (Rees, 2004). Many followers endorse their leader, believing they are a salvationist character, bringing relief from social and economic burdens (Konstadinova and Levitt, 2014; Tucker, 1968). Others are attracted into the cult because of their leader's perceived superior qualities and exceptionality, such as charisma, composure, or religious superiority (Tucker, 1977; Weber, 1986; De Leonardis, 2017).

Acknowledging the different purposes of leader cults is significant because it demonstrates how both leader and followers are necessary to manifest and maintain a personality cult. Also, by exploring *why* leaders and followers join cults, we can better understand *how* leaders use cults to pursue political aims. My research uses these explanations to compare two cases: the personality cults of Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and former American president, Donald Trump, in their respective regimes, the Russian Federation (an electoral autocracy) and the United States of America (a liberal democracy). I use a qualitative methodological approach, which explores the 'experience, meaning, and perspective' (Hammarberg et al., 2016) of Putin's and Trump's personality cults; in other words, *how* they consolidate authoritarianism and to what success. I have chosen Putin's and Trump's cases because they offer a unique and significant comparison, facilitating engaging political discourse as both regimes are global powers with contrasting political systems, shaped by individualised geopolitics and narratives of the East-West rivalry (Smith, 2020; Zlobin, 2008).

Firstly, as a case, Putin's personality cult in the Russian Federation is intriguing and controversial because of its theoretical and practical inconsistencies. Theoretically, Russia is governed by an electoral semi-presidential system and features both autocratic and (nominally) democratic institutions and practices; however, among loyalists, critiques, and analysts, there is wide debate over the nature of Russian politics (White and Mcallister, 2008; Gel'man, 2021). While normative analysts argue, according to theory, Russia is and has been a hybrid system, empirical and critical analysts instead argue that Russia is observably a 'notoriously personalist authoritarian' (Gel'man, 2021) regime, and any democratic institutions are used for repression and control (Gelman, 2014). These inconsistencies demonstrate a need for better understanding of Putin's centralised powers and authoritarian pursuits. Nevertheless, my research acknowledges organisations Freedom House's and V-Dem Institute's independent classifications of democracy, labelling Russia as an electoral

authoritarian regime with highly restricted democratic political activity (Alizanda et al., 2021; Trickett, 2022; Freedom House, 2022).

Secondly, I have also chosen to study Trump's personality cult in the US, because of its atypical nature as a case in authoritarian research; in other words, as a case, Trump's cult is controversial, because it challenges the nature of US liberal democracy, suggesting even the oldest global democracies are vulnerable to authoritarian pursuits. During Trump's presidency (2016-2020), the US demonstrated democratic vulnerability as a result of government transparency and the ethical standards of Trump's new administration (Freedom House, 2019; Freedom House, 2018; Kaufman and Haggard, 2019; Mickey et al., 2017). Thus, Trump's cult, in authoritarian research, is an anomaly case, offering rich and unique perspectives of eroding democratic transition and how a personality cult can undermine longstanding democratic frameworks.

Finally, both regimes have experienced democratic backsliding: state-led eradication and depletion of all political institutions preserving an existing democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Masaru, 2021). A regime's autocratisation is dependent on the pace of democratic backsliding as rapid erosion backsliding tends to lead towards a complete breakdown of democracy and consolidation of authoritarianism. In contrast, a gradual regression of democracy produces more hybrid or ambiguously democratic regimes, rather than full consolidation (Bermeo, 2016; Luhermann and Lindberg, 2019). Because of the complexity of backsliding, my research focuses on two relevant practices of democratic regression: executive aggrandisement and strategic electoral manipulation. Both Putin and Trump have utilised these strategies in effort to pursue authoritarian politics.

The first strategy is executive aggrandisement, referring to the gradual corruption of executive powers, limiting genuine political contestation and meaningful opposition. Aggrandisement occurs when the ruling elite manipulates power checks and legislation in their favour to dominate important legislatures and executive assemblies (Bermeo, 2016). Because elected officials conduct executive aggrandisement through legal efforts, limiting the corruption is challenging, because it is, paradoxically, portrayed as democratic practice (Cianetti et al., 2018; Petrov, 2020). Thus, executive aggrandisement erodes democracy by undermining genuine political contestation and manipulating democratic practice into authoritarian favour.

Secondly, electoral manipulation refers to the elite's electoral frauds, enabling their domination of the electoral arena. There are both explicit and implicit frauds, which create voting irregularities and undermine genuine contestation. Explicit acts include ballot rigging, irregular poll-station timetables, and harassing voters; implicit acts include more institutional tactics, such as government funding of elite campaigns and manipulative state media (Lehoucq, 2003; Bermeo, 2016). Thus, like aggrandisement, electoral manipulation limits genuine political contestation and manipulates a seemingly democratic tradition into authoritarian favour.

This research compares the personality cults of Putin and Trump in their respective regimes and evaluates to what success both personality cults consolidate authoritarianism in their regimes and investigates, which different mechanisms solidify or limit authoritarian consolidation. This comparison and evaluation are organised as following: methodology, results, and discussion. In my methodology, I discuss my data collection and analysis, outlining my research comparison methods and limitations. Next, I discuss my findings by categorising my results into themes to determine the successes

of each leader's cult: while Putin's personality cult is successful in consolidating authoritarianism as a result of managing and using existing regime frameworks to his benefit, Trump's personality cult is unsuccessful in authoritarian consolidation, because of the existing and undermining regime frameworks and opposition. Finally, in my conclusions, I determine the implications of my results and inferences.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

Firstly, my research collects empirical qualitative data, using a wide range of secondary sources and texts. Because personality cults tend to emerge in societies where political discourse is controlled, authoritarian research tends to risk reinforcing potential biases and lack access to reliable and crucial information (Burkhardt, 2020; Hoppen et al., 2019). To limit these challenges and improve the validity of my research, I cross-reference my data by reading and using multiple authors, analysts, and political theorists writing from different perspectives and times.

Secondly, my research uses secondary qualitative content analysis (SQCA) and comparative historical analysis (CHA) to analyse my data. I use SQCA because it offers an interpretative and inductive approach, enabling an in-depth examination for variation, reoccurring patterns, and prevalent similarities and differences in Trump's and Putin's cult performance and authoritarian advancements (Graneheima et al., 2017). In my results, I categorize these variations as themes, which I further transcribe and cross-examine with CHA to validate my hypotheses. CHA refers to the rigorous juxtaposing of social and political phenomena from differing places and times to understand its function and purpose, test hypotheses, and build theory (Do Vale, 2015). I use a specific CHA analytical method known as macro-casual analysis: the comparison of different complex historical and political patterns and phenomena to explore how different patterns derive similar outcomes or how similar patterns derive different outcomes and studies (Do Vale, 2015; Skocpol and Somers, 2009).

Research Limitations

My research is limited by the potential biases within authoritarian-themed literature, including politically sensitive data affected by a regime's culture of heterogenous repression (Reny, 2016; Roberts, 2012; Yusupova, 2019). To reduce this limitation and improve the validity and reliability of my results, I have cross-examined a variety of perspectives and literature. Similarly, to avoid an unbiased perspective of cult supporters and practice, I have studied the engagement of both extreme fanatics and the common public to gain a balanced and empirical understanding of how cults manifest and integrate in open and closed societies.

Additionally, my results are dependent on the specific conditions of my cases and are not statistically representative of open and closed societies, which limits the generalisability of my inferences; however, to reduce this limitation, my case selection is based on two diverse settings with contrasting regime representations, producing in-depth and rich results (McLeod, 2019). Also, to reduce the lack of scientific vigour of my qualitative approach, I employed various literature and data including analyses of quantitative statistics to cross-examine my data and results with quantitative measurements, increasing the validity of my methodology.

RESULTS

Personality Cult Institutionalisation

Overall, my results demonstrate Putin has successfully consolidated authoritarianism in Russia, while Trump has failed in the US. This difference is a result of regime differences, because their authoritarian consolidation is dependent on their regime type and expectations. This validates my central hypothesis that the success of authoritarian consolidation with the use of personality cults is dependent on the regime type during democratic backsliding. More specifically, when democratic backsliding occurs, their regimes' existing political and cultural frameworks have enabled or resisted the institutionalisation of their personality cults. While most of Russia's political culture has adopted and enabled the growth of Putin's personality cult, in the US, Trump's cult has faced widescale public and institutional resistance. The following sub-themes demonstrate these claims and further validate my central hypothesis, as well as the mechanisms behind it.

Image Cultivation

My results exemplify how both leaders have used their image, referring to a leader's personality, character, and competence, or the 'non-political characteristics' (Nai et al., 2019: 611), to influence public political orientation and authoritarian consolidation. Both leaders have invested strong efforts to propagate their image into society, igniting the birth of their personality cults and authoritarian consolidation efforts (Bittner, 2011; Ekstrom and Federico, 2019; Fortunato, 2018).

Firstly, since the beginning of his presidency in 2000, Putin has actively concentrated his political power through an active cultivation of his personalist leadership image and gradual integration of himself into Russian institutions. Putin has consistently portrayed himself as the embodiment of Russian restoration and greatness, becoming nationally recognized as the unifier of fragmented post-Soviet Russia. This idealisation has ignited the birth of his personality cult, and Putin's image has been widely circulated and codified into the cultural and political spheres of Russian society, growing his domineering societal and political presence (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010; Sharafutdinova, 2020; White and McAllister, 2003).

Initially, Putin's efforts to institutionalise his growing cult began as a state-controlled strategy, aiming to integrate Putin's politics and values into Russia's existing political frameworks. For instance, Russia's executive governmental branch, the Kremlin, facilitated Putin's campaign by nationalising main state channels and mass media to promote Putin's leadership and superiority, while censoring his political contestation (Goldman, 2010). This narrative cultivated Putin's image as the prime example of strength, masculinity, and discipline; all socially and politically favourable characteristics, which reflect the values of the Russian public and their major religious body, the Orthodox Church (Oliker, 2017; Sharafutdinova, 2020; Smyth, 2014).

These propagated connotations have enabled Putin to present himself as an extension of Russian 21st century reformation and traditional righteousness, facilitating genuine support from Russians, especially in response to their post-Soviet economic and social burdens, belief in the Orthodox Church, and Russian nationalism (Matovski, 2020; Rose et al., 2011). This campaign demonstrates how Putin's cult was formed along the lines of Russian society, allowing the Kremlin to generate genuine support for Putin and his authoritarian-led politics. In other words, already Putin's early political success was dependent on Putin's ability to work alongside his regime specific characteristics and demands, not against them.

In comparison, Trump and his Republican administration, too, facilitated strong initiatives to propagate Trump's image to reform US political culture (Schedlet, 2019). Trump's cult formed during his 2016 presidential campaign, when Trump introduced himself as a political anomaly and a 'man of the people' (Karakaya and Edgell, 2021). His unprecedented, controversial social commentary attracted him strong public support and strong media presence, both internationally and domestically, because it challenged existing presidential expectations (Azari, 2016; Erichsen et al., 2020; Wimberly, 2018). This demonstrates that while Putin aligned his image along traditional Russian conventions, Trump presented himself through unconventional narratives and atypical political rhetoric. Furthermore, Putin broadcasted himself as a multifaceted 'mirror in which everyone, communist or democrat, sees what he wants to see and what he hopes for' (White and McAllister, 2003) and remained politically independent from existing parties to strengthen his canonization and generate himself broad, genuine support (White and McAllister, 2003; Cassidy and Johnson, 2010).

In contrast, Trump led with divisive tactics and controversial rhetoric, which generated support from targeted specific communities, rather than the entire US population, resulting in a strong division of Trump supporters and opposers (Austermuehl, 2020; Grossman and Thaler, 2018). For example, affirmed his right-wing orientation and appealed to white right-wing middle-class citizens (mostly men) by appealing to their specific social anxieties and economic burdens. Trump blamed unemployment and deindustrialisation on foreign nations and natives, crime and welfare exploitation on minority groups and immigrants, and terrorism and security issues on Muslims (Narayan, 2017). Simultaneously, in his mandate to Make America Great Again (MAGA), Trump prompted new economic plans and reforms to increase employment and return American prosperity (Fording and Schram, 2017; Siegel, 2018).

Therefore, while Putin led with inclusivity, Trump led with alienation to generate strong, albeit controversial, support. As my results will continue to demonstrate, this is significant, because it results in their differing levels of political engagement, support, and opposition, which, ultimately, enabled Putin's cult's authoritarian consolidation, while disabling Trump's cult. Nevertheless, despite using differing cult strategies to attract supporters, they both presented themselves as 'salvationist characters' (Tucker, 1968), promising to ease the anxieties of their followers, resulting in strong image cultivation and cult formation (Burston, 2017; Matovski, 2020).

As discussed, Putin formed his cult along the existing narratives and Russian political culture, contributing to his genuine cult support. Furthermore, although Putin's cult began as a Kremlin-led strategy, it was quickly adopted by Russian institutions and society. Putin's cult triggered into a social movement, referred to as Putiana, the Putin Craze (Cassidy and Johnson, 2010; Gosciolo, 2013; Sharafutdinova, 2020). This movement integrated Putin into all levels of society by and for the public. In the realm of arts and culture, Putin was celebrated as an icon, spreading his leadership and image around Russia through art. Similarly, Russian schools adopted a new curriculum, featuring mandatory readings of Putin's autobiography, and Putin's portraits were propagated in educational institutions, integrating Putin's influence among the youth of society too. As a result, by the end of Putin's first presidential term, his cult was integrated into all societal institutions, and Russian society had adopted Putin's authoritarian politics and cult (Cassidy and Johnson, 2010; Gosciolo, 2013; White and McAllister; White and McAllister 2008). This demonstrates how the existing Russian institutions and frameworks adopted Putin's

personality cult and promoted it to further depths in society. Therefore, Putin's authoritarian consolidation, with the use of his personality cult, was dependent on successful cult institutionalisation into Russian institutions and frameworks.

Similarly, Putin has promoted his centralised power by relating his cult to Russia's autocratic history. The Kremlin maintains a strategic balance in the comparison and criticism of, former Soviet leader, Stalin to Putin, glorifying their roles in Russian growth and stability. This comparison has led the public to perceive Putin's aggressive politics as a necessity in the current political climate, just like Stalin's during the 20th century (Sharafutdinova, 2020; Cassidy and Johnson, 2010; Sherlock, 2016). Thus, by managing pre-existing cultural narratives, Putin has gained legitimacy through the existing political frameworks and institutions of Russia, enabling successful authoritarian consolidation.

In comparison, Trump's cult, too, became a popular movement in the US. At Trump rallies, or 'identity festivals' (Reicher and Haslam, 2017), Trump's cult gained momentum as supporters developed political identity and belongingness, which strengthened their loyalty in Trump's right-wing politics. Specifically, Trump's cult allowed his supporters to re-envision their political narratives from 'a lament to an adventure' (Karakaya and Edgell, 2021), intensifying his cult support (Karakaya and Edgell, 2021; Wagner, 2018; Yousaf and Snyder Jr., 2020). Therefore, Trump's (limited) successes were dependent on his cult followers' adoption of his controversial rhetoric; resulting in gradual democratic backsliding and authoritarian advancement in the US.

Additionally, Trump's antagonization of news organisation, outlets, and journalists, referring to them as 'fake news', in attempt to delegitimize their credibility to construct his own victorious narrative without limitations, prompted various alternative right and fringe groups to adopt his personality cult and spread anti-liberal narratives and conspiracy theories online (Happer et al., 2018; Siegel, 2018; Tamul et al., 2019). These widely spread online narratives encourage users to antagonize Trump's rivals, while promoting theories of Trump's heroism, such as Trump's secret role as a spy and his takedown of corrupt elitists (Bleakly, 2021; Cosentino, 2020). This validates H2, because Trump's successes in gaining political support and pushing for authoritarian-led politics was dependent on the existing communities in the US.

Similarly, Trump solidified his personality cult during the 2016 elections among American Christians by promoting Christian nationalism and American Christian heritage. This resulted in growing support and glorification among ordinary and extremist Christians (Whitehead et al., 2018). For example, extremist, former Ku Klux Klan leader, David Duke actively campaigned for Trump, claiming he would restore American greatness (Naughtie, 2020). Also, devoted white Evangelicals glorified Trump as 'the messiah, a precursor to the second coming, or on a divine mission' (Adams, 2021). This demonstrates how Trump's cult was adopted in various layers of society, enabling Trump to solidify his political dominance. This demonstrates how his (albeit limited) political success was a result of how the existing societal and political institutions accepted his cult and image.

Furthermore, the extent of each leader's cult institutionalisation gives insight into the results of their authoritarian consolidation. Since his second presidential term, Putin has enjoyed unprecedented levels of public approval for his centralised politics, and his cult and image have been fully integrated into Russian society and politics along the frameworks of Russian tradition and public expectations and desires (Cassidy and Johnson, 2010; Matovski, 2020; Smyth, 2014; White and McAllister, 2008). This is exemplified in the Levada-Centre

2021 report: Putin's earned a 65% public approval rating as the President of Russia, illustrating the full institutionalisation of Putin's cult and successful consolidation of authoritarianism (Levada Centre, 2022). In contrast, Pew Research Centre (2018), after the 2016 elections, reported only a 45% voting preference for Trump, in comparison to his political rival, Clinton (48%); and, in 2020, Trump was defeated by Joe Biden 306-232 in the Electoral College (Igielnik et al., 2021). These figures, demonstrating Trump's underwhelming support rate in both 2018 and 2020, illustrate the limited nature of Trump's and his cult's institutionalisation. Trump's atypical approach, contradicting the expectations of US politics, failed to integrate into US democracy. Therefore, each leader's authoritarian consolidation was dependent on the type and existing politics of their regime, and they enabled or disabled each leader's cult institutionalisation.

Legal Culture

Throughout Putin's and Trump's personality cult institutionalisation, both leaders have engaged in legal culture to advance their personalist and authoritarian politics. Firstly, Putin's successful authoritarian consolidation has been dependent on his pre-emptive strikes against his opposition and conflict. For example, in the Putin Doctrine (2012), Putin stigmatized liberal-reform movements and civic activism, limited freedom of speech, and restricted non-governmental organisations, specifically those with foreign funding. In 2020, Putin extended these existing laws on NGOs, threatening employees with raids, fines, and arrests and increasing further restrictions on their ability to organize events, report on elections, and issue any public statements on legislation to eliminate Western political influence. These restrictions were both symbolic and practical, demonstrating Putin's political transformation towards more aggressive and unchallenged politics (Flikke, 2016; Freedom House, 2021; Lanskoj and Suthers, 2013; Appelbaum, 2018). Additionally, the Kremlin has increased its surveillance and influence internationally, in former Soviet Republics by expanding their main surveillance system, SORM, to new borders, allowing Putin to locate and track opposition movements in foreign states. This has allowed Putin to legally target his opposition, further institutionalising his personality cult internationally, building a 'complex web of broad and ambiguous legislation to keep constant pressure on would-be "troublemakers"' (Lanskoj and Suthers 2013; Ognyanova, 2019). This exemplifies how Putin has undermined opposition movements and pressure by pre-emptively utilizing legal culture in his favour to prevail against any challenge or opposition against his authoritarian consolidation.

On the other hand, Trump's cult was rejected by the existing US legal frameworks, disabling his cult institutionalisation and, consequently, authoritarian consolidation. For example, during his first presidential year, Trump promised to repeal over 75% of federal regulations, and during his first month in office, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice revoked an Obama-era reform, offering protections for transgender students and their lavatory preferences. However, generally, Trump was limited by US legal frameworks, as deregulatory orders require long-term agency follow-throughs. Thus, his 75% ambition fell short, reaching only approximately 11% (Potter et al., 2019). Similarly, while Trump actively progressed his rhetoric about Russia, such as advocating for Russia's presence at the G7 summit in 2018, Trump's own national security advisor released a statement, denying Trump's advocations (Abrams, 2019). Therefore, despite his maximalist ambitions, Trump's reforms did not have the extensive result he desired and were compromised by his own administration's efforts to manage the expectations of US continuity and the entire public, rather than solely the objectives of Trump and his supporter base.

This is further demonstrated through Trump's attempt to reshape and redefine the US government. During his presidency, Trump transformed his administration into a pro-Trumpist executive body, appointing loyalist Republicans, right-wing extremists, family members, and billionaires to power in effort to concentrate his political power (Harris et al., 2017; Kellner, 2017). Nevertheless, once again, Trump was challenged internally: Trump's political ambitions received historically low support from Democratic senators and representatives, and Trump was continuously challenged by Democrats through impeachment charges, over 200 lawsuits, and active criticism from loud rivals, such as Democrat Nancy Pelosi (Gorman, 2017; Kamarck, 2021). Therefore, while Trump's reforms and appointments threatened the legacy and traditions of US democracy, in practice, Trump was consistently challenged by other governmental bodies and politicians (Kuhner, 2017; Weyland, 2021). To conclude, Trump failed to reshape US legal culture because his cult was not adopted by the existing legal frameworks of the US, resulting in failed authoritarian consolidation. Compared to Putin, Trump's efforts to manipulate and reform legal culture into his cult favour were limited and short-term, while Putin acted pre-emptively and with long-term objectives.

Democratic Backsliding

My results demonstrate both Putin and Trump employed their personality cults to erode the existing democratic institutions and traditions within their regime in attempt to consolidate authoritarianism. While Putin's cult successfully undermined democratic institutions within his regime to support authoritarianism, Trump's cult failed in manipulating democracy into his political favour.

Executive Aggrandizement

Both leaders have used executive aggrandizement to further promote their cults, but with varying success. Under Putin's presidency, Russia has experienced rapid and complete democratic breakdown as Putin has effectively centralised all executive powers to himself, crippling any political contestation. For example, in 2005 and 2006, Putin introduced a series of media and antiterrorist legislation to restrict public freedom of speech and enable the intense eradication of his political rivals (Waldner and Lust, 2015). Similarly, in 2020, Putin used executive aggrandisement to further strengthen his personality cult and power by organizing a 'highly choreographed referendum' (Freedom House, 2021), which extended Putin's presidential limits until 2036. This demonstrates how Putin uses nominally democratic frameworks to undermine pre-existing democratic and constitutional restraints on his power and restrict any pro-democratic contestation (Chaisty, 2019). This is significant, because it exemplifies how Putin's authoritarian consolidation has relied on Russia's expectations of autocratic powers and limited democratic tradition to increase his power, while disabling genuine contestation. This indicates that the success of authoritarian consolidation is dependent on the leader's ability to navigate opposition according to the existing frameworks and political expectations of a regime. In comparison, Trump, too, has attempted to undermine American democracy with the use of executive aggrandisement, but with less success. While Trump's polarizing rhetoric and consistent attack on democratic norms and values, including the judiciary, press, science, and, ultimately, the rule of law, have threatened American democracy more than any other president by allowing him to use these democratic practices as political weapons, by 2020 Trump's political support stagnated and he was elected out of office. (Bernhard and O'Neill, 2019; Edwards III, 2021; Gidengil et al., 2021; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Ikenberry, 2017; Oliner, 2017). This demonstrates how Trump's efforts to undermine US democracy

were limited and, ultimately, his cult could not persist against the pressure and consistent challenge of his opposition. Therefore, like Putin, Trump's authoritarian consolidation (or lack of) was dependent on his regime and their existing democratic tradition and framework. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean Trump's failed executive aggrandisement is insignificant. Rather, Trump's ability to transform institutions, commonly associated with neutrality, into politicised weapons suggests weaknesses within the current state of US democracy (Micket et al., 2017). Similarly, Trump's initial popularity and cult support warn of potential changes in political orientation and atmosphere within even the oldest democracies (Mead, 2017). Therefore, while Trump has failed to consolidate authoritarianism during democratic backsliding in the US, his cult formation and efforts are important in acknowledging even the most long-standing democracies are vulnerable to erosion and regime transition. This is significant in understanding the current rise and spread of autocracies and authoritarian-led politics globally and the potential risks this trend holds to democratic or hybrid regimes.

Electoral Manipulation

Both leaders have used electoral manipulation to strengthen their personality cult for successful authoritarian consolidation, but, again, with varying success. Firstly, Putin has exerted his control over federal politics and elections, strengthening his authoritarian consolidation. For example, in 2004, Putin replaced local elections with directly appointed regional governors, while, simultaneously, restricting the entry-access of smaller parties into the Russian parliament, the Duma. These reforms have allowed Putin to gradually and strategically influence federal politics and elections to strengthen his influence on Russian politics and consolidate authoritarianism on all levels of society. (Oliker, 2017; Rosefielde and Hlouskova, 2007). Similarly, Putin exerts control over the Russian multiparty system by strategically determining which parties are accepted into the Duma based on their potential threat and challenge to him or, his supporting party, United Russia. Also, Putin chooses which parties are funded and which receive grants by the Kremlin and other political elite, based on the parties' ideologies and objectives, and if they conform to his authoritarian politics (Gokarn, 2018). Therefore, Putin has reformed the geographic space of federal politics, forcing the political arena to adopt his personality cult, enabling his successful authoritarian consolidation, while limiting any genuine political contestation or opposition.

In contrast, while Putin gradually converted the legal conventions of the Russian electoral arena into his favour, Trump's strategy to manipulate electoral results was based to great extent on his controversial rhetoric and cult support. For example, in 2016, Trump falsely claimed of mass voting frauds to undermine his cult supporters' belief in the legitimacy of the electoral process for his benefit, which resulted in vote recounts and a last-minute legislature passed by Republican office holders to prevent the victory of a democratic governor (Mickey et al., 2017). However, when he reattempted to undermine the 2020 electoral results (and his loss), his claims were proven false and Biden became the 46th US president, disabling his cults' authoritarian objectives during democratic backsliding (Eggers et al., 2021; Pennycook, 2021). Therefore, Trump's rhetoric, based on speculation, was limited in having any longstanding and long-term effects on US elections because the nature of US democracy is rooted in the legitimacy of popular

vote and democratic checks against centralised power. On the contrary, Putin's efforts to manipulate elections and federal politics have been successful, because Russia doesn't share the same democratic legacy; thus, Putin was able to use and corrupt the nominally democratic systems for his own benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

My results show that Putin's personality cult successfully consolidated authoritarianism in Russia, because of Putin's use of Russia's existing institutions and frameworks to enable the growth of his cult and to pre-emptively undermine when backsliding occurs. In contrast, Trump's cult has failed to consolidate authoritarianism in the US, because his cult was limited by the existing democratic frameworks and norms, causing his cult to disintegrate against political opposition. These results validate my hypotheses, demonstrating how the success of authoritarian consolidation is dependent on regime type when democratic backsliding occurs, because the regime's existing political frameworks and opposition enable or hinder cult success. This validation is significant, because it gives insight into the mechanisms of authoritarian growth in both open and closed regimes.

More specifically, in closed regimes, such as Putin's autocracy, successful authoritarian consolidation is dependent on pre-emptive strategies, which develop a hostile environment that undermines any and all genuine political contestation against the autocrat. In contrast, Trump's case suggests that when backsliding occurs in open regimes, investing in the loyalty and support of existing institutions and frameworks is a priority to enable cult institution and, consequently, authoritarian consolidation. Also, Trump's case suggests that leading by polarisation may lead in cult rejection and disintegration if this polarisation is not managed adequately.

These inferences are significant, because they give insight into the mechanisms, environments, and practices which enable the global rise of authoritarianism. They demonstrate the various strategies leaders employ to undermine threats to their personalist politics. Also, studying these strategies and threats is a necessity to understand the complexity of the current international conflicts between autocratic and democratic states (e.g. Russia and Ukraine). Furthermore, these inferences are relevant, because they illustrate the current state of the politics within Russia and the US. As mentioned earlier, although Trump failed to consolidate authoritarianism, this does not indicate US liberal democracy is in healthy condition. Similarly, although Putin has consolidated a strong authoritarian regime, contemporary conflicts could overturn and undermine his political supremacy, if the frameworks feeding his power are overturned.

Additionally, by exploring the mechanisms of authoritarianism and regime transition, my research contributes to the contemporary understanding of the consequences and causes of repression in advanced democracies and open societies. This is significant, because repression and personalist politics in open societies tends to be understudied by scholars (Crabtree et al., 2018). Therefore, my research has produced significant results and inferences, which give insight into authoritarian consolidation and regime transition. Thus, my research has yielded significant conclusions, which contribute to this growing awareness and literature of authoritarian politics.

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