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Women, Populism, Democracy:
A Comparative Study of Democracy and Populism in Turkey and the United States

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Political Science and Public Service

Examination Date: April 14, 2023

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Introduction

On January 6, 2021, former President Donald Trump issued an exhortation that brought violence upon the United States capital. The indignant words, "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," incited violence among hundreds of people (Anderson, 2021; Trump, 2021). The proclamation charged with anti-democratic sentiment connected with those who felt the 2020 election was fraught with fraudulent votes (Anderson 2021; Rachman 2022, p. 130-131). This inflammatory rhetoric is common among populist leaders who seek to pit ordinary people against a perceived corrupt elite. These elites are often politicians or institutions that have been distorted. Populist leaders frequently seek division by creating scapegoats and categorizing democratic institutions or leaders as distant from the people (Mudde 2017, p. 6).

Throughout the duration of his campaigns and his presidency, former President Trump highlighted himself as a political outsider and a champion of the working class. He promised to restore power to the aggrieved and further connected with the people through the use of emotive and divisive language. These promises resonated with many conservatives and Republicans who felt undermined by the previous administration. Moreover, the perceived problems of the American people were pinned on marginalized groups and compounded with misinformation.

Populist rhetoric is not limited to the United States; rather, populist leaders are on the rise globally. Turkey's conservative ruling party, the AKP, relies on a common strategy among populist of promoting a homogenous, sameness via Muslim and Ottoman identities (Mostov, 2021 p. 1). Moreover, they appeal to this identity by promising to safeguard the polity from the corruption and infiltration of the immoralities of the West (Lord, 2018; Mostov, 2021 p.1). As such, religion has played a significant role in developing populism in Turkey. While originally,

its policies and tactics were fairly moderate, the party has trended towards the use of Islamism and the erosion of democratic guardrails to achieve its power (Arat, 2019). The AKP maintains support through its rhetoric and right-wing populist strategies, which are often aimed at protecting the values of traditional families and conservative gender roles. Appeals to the religiosity of the people legitimize support for the party even if they do not fully agree with certain actions.

While Trump and Erdoğan target different threats to their states, women are frequently demeaned by their rhetoric and policy (Arat, 2010; 2019). In Turkey, conservative, religious women are increasingly likely to support Erdoğan and the AKP because of their desire to protect the state from the immoralities of modernization. While protections from violence for women, such as the Istanbul Convention, have been lost, many remain supportive of the regime because of policies such as the welfare state. The party relies on the trust of women to allow the government to legislate and protect on their behalf of them (Özkazanç 2020).

While populism is on the rise, studies indicate that democracy is in decline in many states (Freedom House, 2022). Following the end of the Cold War, the international community experienced a surge in democracy. Many scholars found hope for the third wave of democracy in the fall of communism (Khmelko 2019). Yet over the past decade, dozens of democracies globally experienced the erosion of electoral integrity and the loss of civil liberties (Freedom House 2023, p. 5). Free and fair elections are paramount for democratic regimes, and the erosion of these norms is largely the result of an increase in right-wing populist leaders.

The pervasive influence of populism significantly contributes to the rise in democratic backsliding. The emergence of authoritarian tendencies creates significant implications for the international community. One of the main ways authoritarian regimes threaten international

security is by undermining the democratic process and the rule of law within their own countries. This often leads to political instability, economic turmoil, and humanitarian crises, which can spill over into other countries and destabilize entire regions. Moreover, the erosion of democratic norms often threatens women and their safety.

The loss of democratic institutions in Turkey has manifested authoritarian tendencies that point to backsliding into a single-party rule. Women support the regime even through its regression because of their appeals and policies. Islam has been used throughout each portion of the AKP's time in politics, including gaining power and legislating policies. By relying on the religiosity of the Turkish population, the AKP secured power and legitimized its role as the protector of morality.

This paper will demonstrate the intersection of women in support of right-wing populists and its threat to democracy. First, it will define populism with an emphasis on the traits of right-wing leaders. Then, it will present a case study of each country, starting with Turkey and proceeding to the US. The case studies will highlight these tendencies, as well as the rhetoric and policies regarding women. Finally, it will compare the two states concerning individual democratic backsliding and its implications for the international community.

Populism and Ambivalent Sexism

Populist leaders tend to use similar methods of capturing support though they live in different political and social dynamics. The vast differences in the socio-economic dimensions of states indicate that the strategy and goal will be the same while rhetorical content will adapt to the given situation. Populism is a political ideology that emphasizes the needs and concerns of ordinary people and often pits "the people" against "the corrupt elite." Populists argue that politicians and institutions have become distant from ordinary citizens and that the elite does not understand or care about the needs of the people. Populists often present themselves as the "voice of the people" and promise to restore power to the people by challenging the existing political and economic system.

Populists often use emotive and divisive language, and they may scapegoat marginalized groups, such as immigrants, minorities, and foreigners, as the source of society's problems. They also tend to reject expertise and present themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the people. This practice can take different forms and can be found on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Left-wing populism emphasizes issues such as economic inequality and social justice, while right-wing populism emphasizes issues such as immigration, national security, and economic nationalism.

An element that is increasingly employed in right-wing populist rhetoric is the use of ambivalent sexism (Glick 2019). Glick and Fiske's theory of ambivalent sexism suggests that "sexism comes in two varieties, hostile and benevolent" (Glick, 2019; Glick and Fiske, 1996 p.491-492). Hostile sexism is used to demean women: it views women as a competitor and

subsequently a threat to men. Conversely, benevolent sexism places emphasis on the positive features of femininity; those who employ benevolent sexism idealize and praise subservient women. While both hostile and benevolent sexism illustrate the traditional gender roles, Glick and Fiske stress that benevolent sexism's positive view of women is "contingent, idealizing women only when they remain in... subordinate roles that serve men's needs and reinforce men's power." Most often, leaders strategically employ ambivalent sexism, using both hostile and benevolent sexism "as the stick and the carrot." As such, ambivalent sexism acts as a method for keeping women in place by encouraging "women to remain in lower status roles by threatening women who pursue power and rewarding those who enact traditional roles" (Glick and Fiske). Moreover, it is increasingly compounded with religious ethos, in which the user draws divine support for sexist behavior and beliefs.

Additionally, right-wing populists implement a "nostalgic nationalism" to appeal to those who feel wronged by modernization (Rachman, 2017). Nostalgic nationalism emphasizes "the nostalgic appeal of a more stable, homogeneous and nation-centered past" (Ibid). While the ideas of stability and state are not necessarily bad, these sentiments can potentially become politically dangerous. When "it slides into mythmaking and hostility to outsiders," this nostalgia poses a threat to minority communities within a state and international political opponents that may be perceived as perilous to the nation's integrity.

Ultimately, the use of populism in politics isn't inherently dangerous; however, it has the potential to polarize states and exploit firmly established prejudices in society. Moreover, by drawing on religious sentiments, populists have the ability to weaponize their ethos as a divine instrument.

Turkey: Rise of Populist Islamism

Turkey's movement from a secular state to a religious, semi-authoritarian society has been building for decades. The dissipation of religious freedom occurred in several stages throughout the Kemalist Reformation, as devotion to secularism and modern advances were the sole priorities of the founding government. As such, religious ideology was abolished in exchange for science and reason; the Caliphate was dissolved in 1924, and a new constitution that prioritized the ideals of the West was installed. Muslim monuments and Sharia law became fragments of an antiquated past that culminated in the loss of the right to wear headscarves in public. Though the state flourished under extreme secular rule, the loss of strong Ottoman values upon the founding of the new Republic of Turkey left many citizens dissatisfied.

Throughout the years since its founding, the people of Turkey have sought to return to the principles of Islam and Ottoman identity. It seemed that no political party could quite grasp the desires and needs of the population until the creation of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. Since the creation of the AKP, the founder Recep Tayyip Erdoğan slowly climbed the ranks of political power. His political career has been spent creating the perfect response to Western ideological invasions. Erdoğan's Islamic worldview has become increasingly apparent throughout his time in power as he reveals his fundamentalist gender ideals. Over twenty years in various government offices, Erdoğan successfully repealed policies that protected women from violence and criticized women that adhere to Western norms. Yet, many Turkish women remain steadfast in support of the current president and the AKP. Moreover, Turkey is rapidly experiencing democratic backsliding to single-party authoritarian rule. While there are many

factors that contributed to the rise of authoritarian populism, this portion of the paper will focus on the role of women in supporting right-wing religious populism in Turkey. Two phases of populist sentiment will be examined. Most recently, with the use of religious-nationalist rhetoric and conservative Islamic ideologies, the AKP established an agenda that is manifesting authoritarian tendencies. While the party's fundamentalist perspectives on gender seep into politics, the support of Muslim women is crucial to regime sustainability.

The AKP's Populist Characteristics

In its initial rise to power, the AKP relied on the people to disseminate its propaganda. The arguments would be strategically designed for different facets of society. As Arat analyzed wrote in her book *Turkey between Democracy and Authoritarianism*, "In a newly established poor shanty-town neighborhood, the women activists would problematize the lack of services and focus on material needs, whereas in an established conservative district they would emphasize non-material values such as the importance of not imitating the West and the provision of religious services" (Arat 2019, p. 95). The initial appeal to the Turkish population was versatile and moderate. As the party sought to gain traction among the people, it was crucial that the AKP remained moderate and appealed to those that had been suppressed by secular leadership. The party gained ground by proposing the expansion of liberties, like freedoms of religion and expression, which appealed to a majority of the population (Arat 2019, p. 95). These freedoms countered the illiberalism of the secular parties that long-held power, and the AKP quickly gained popular power.

The AKP's Islamic values were not always so fundamentalist. However, the moderate nature of the early AKP was compounded by an appeal to the Sunni religious majority. According to Arat, "the Islamic movement appealed to human rights as it contested the secular

nature of the Turkish state to expand religious rights" (2005, p. 5). This call to the religious population was further legitimized with the illustration of the Islamist movement "as the authentic victim and as outside of and excluded by the state" as a result of Kemalist secularization (Lord 239). Thus, a crucial characteristic of the AKP's initial populist rhetoric was creating an inseparable link between democratic liberties and Islam. The formation of the secular state in 1923 attempted to separate this connection that many devout Muslim Turks align themselves. As the party gained popularity, Islam and policy became inextricably linked. It is an effort to conserve and revitalize Muslim values previously stripped by secularization. What once was a state bound by freedom from religion cultivated a population desperate for Islamic inclusivity, and the AKP was to ensure this restoration.

As religion became increasingly intertwined with Turkish politics, the party sought to create an image of indignance against the existing government. The installation of division and mistrust against those that attempt to suppress and destroy a set of values, usually a set of supposedly corrupt elites, is critical in populist agendas. Some scholars suggest that "Populisms thrive on the devotion to sameness in the protection of "us" against the dangerous others and those "elites" who are ready to sacrifice us for them" (Mostov, 2021 p.2). As such, the given leader will likely make it evident that he knows what the people seek and is ready to guard it. The populist leader will then use rhetoric and actions to convey further the importance of protecting the ideological grounds. Additionally, Mostov (2021) found that:

This linkage between closure and democracy has, in fact, fed the current slide to authoritarian populism. It brings the nationalist process of establishing external hard borders inside the polity, casting suspicion on "unacceptable" or dangerous members

within the polity. It is accompanied by curbs on the free press, voter suppression, police surveillance, and brutality. (p.3)

In such cases, the populist leader not only secures ideological support but continues to erode the democratic guardrails to maintain control. In recent years, the loss of the liberties that the AKP initially represented has become increasingly present in Turkey; President Erdoğan suppresses peaceful demonstrations and allows for police brutality against its citizens. The second phase of AKP relied on the division between the religious population and the secular population.

Recent Electoral History and Populist Strategies

Recent electoral history in Turkey indicates the success of the AKP's populist methodology in nearly every election since 2002. A 2016 study on gender and elections in Turkey evidences the relationship between religiosity and support for the AKP. The authors suggest that stronger Muslim values correlate to an increase in support for the AKP and President Erdoğan (Fidrmuc 2015, 3). The study concludes not only that religiosity increases support for the party, but education among women decreases support for the party (Fidrmuc 2015, 11). Thus, Erdoğan's appeals to religious identity are targeted at the conservative values of Muslim voters. The strategy relies upon creating a significant contrast between the Muslim people of Turkey and those swayed by Western ideals. The first goal is to incorporate distrust within society; if the election is lost, the country could descend into complete moral chaos in which women are no longer chaste. Condemning the educated and arguably more Westernized women of Turkey is one of the first steps in cultivating this divide. However, religious connections cannot influence all voters. A 2014 study found that women were increasingly likely to vote for Erdoğan because of the strong welfare system (Kandiyoti 2014). The beneficiaries of this aid are largely women, and they consisted of the majority of President Erdoğan's votes in the

2010 elections (Kandiyoti 2014). For these women, the AKP provides a sense of security that might be lost among other parties. The combination of both economic and religious security generates a credible appeal to conservative women. Moreover, the value of unity as an Islamic society that the AKP represents is crucial to defeating the war against western secularization (Kandiyoti 2014).

Authoritarian Tendencies

As illustrated above, populist regimes often exhibit symptoms of authoritarianism, beginning with the erosion of freedoms. This is evidenced as Turkish people are experiencing the loss of civil liberties as Erdoğan's presidency progresses. In 2022, Freedom House released a report that scores states' political rights and civil liberties from 0 to 100, with the latter score representing completely free. Turkey was given a score of 32: a position deemed "not free." As previously discussed, the loss of freedoms is a significant change from the AKP's early policy, which was remarkably moderate. The report suggests that the AKP "has pursued a wide-ranging crackdown on critics and opponents since 2016" following the attempted coup. Freedom House details the extensive censorship of Turkish society, from the media to peaceful protest. Moreover, dissent is routinely met with prosecution and imprisonment as the regime monitors social media (Freedom House, 2022). Dr. Arat posits that the censorship of the media and the loss of an independent judiciary branch are key signs of democratic backsliding in the state (2019, p. 88). Arat goes on to say that "the new elites hollowed out the concepts of democracy, judicial autonomy, and rights and liberties. They dispensed with norms and prevented the electorate from hearing the opposition. A fragmented and disorganized opposition was not able to counter Erdoğan's charismatic control" (p. 6). The dissipation of institutions that safeguard democracy is evidenced in several referendums. Thus, there is a trend that "as popular support

for the AKP increased, the party imposed increasingly unfair terms of competition in elections" (Arat 2019, p. 3). The unfair competition and erosion of guardrails resulted in the referendum that solidified President Erdoğan and the AKP's power. In 2017, one year after an attempted coup, the Republic of Turkey elected, by popular vote, to change its constitution allowing the previously ceremonial role of president to become the official head of state. The amendment consolidated powers that were previously distributed amongst executive and legislative branches and allotted them to the president. The new presidential powers created by this referendum officially dissolved the role of the prime minister in the Turkish government. The following year the Turkish people reelected President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for a second term in office.

Islam's Influence on the AKP's Agenda

To fully understand the role of women in support of the regime, it is critical to illustrate the role of Islam in the AKP's populist agenda. President Erdoğan's conservative rhetoric and policies brought religious revival to the state. The paternalist gender roles perpetuated by Islam have largely influenced legislation and other governmental actions toward women and families in recent years. As previously discussed, the influence of Islam on policy was positive for a brief period as it allowed for the renewed right to wear headscarves in public and private. However, as the AKP evolved to be largely Islamist, legislation followed suit. The moderate policies that provided for the criminalization of femicide in the penal code were accompanied by legislation to recriminalize adultery (Parmaksiz, 2016). Though the attempt to recriminalize adultery failed, the AKP condemned feminist opposition for its dissent against the religious majority (Parmaksiz, 2016). While the discourse of political leaders is direct in its promotion of traditional gender roles, the proliferation of Islamism in policy is largely indirect.

During the second term of AKP power, policies restricting pensions made it difficult for women to achieve retirement. This resulted in a decline in female participation in the workforce as it became more difficult for women to achieve retirement (Arat, 2010). Furthermore, the repeal of a policy that allowed women access to their father's health insurance further undermined women's economic independence from their husbands (Arat, 2010). The culmination of these actions created prime conditions for women to remain the sole caretakers and homemakers with increased reliance on the husband to provide for the family. The AKP's religiously motivated actions achieved the results necessary to contain women as they advised them to "Give birth to at least three children" (Tuysuz, 2016). Furthermore, the president critiqued women by saying "A woman who refuses motherhood by saying, 'I work,' is in fact denying her womanhood" (Tuysuz, 2016). Thus, the patriarchal policies reflect the influence of Islamic ideals that require the control of women's lives and bodies.

Throughout rhetoric, policy, and politics, President Erdoğan and the AKP have developed a system of ambivalent sexism by both reinforcing positive qualities of motherhood, restricting independence, and criticizing women who prioritize work. Condemnation of feminist opposition and praise of traditionally religious women illustrate the use of hostile and benevolent sexism in tandem. The increased reliance upon husbands and fathers while women remain homemakers is the desired outcome of their ambivalent policy.

Female Support of the Regime

Women represented a large portion of the AKP's initial support system. While arguably benefitting the most from the secular system, women "mobilized and criticized the illiberal nature of human rights in the country" (Arat, 2019). The secular parties had fallen short of their promises to women, specifically suppressing religious and ethnic groups. Women searched for

democratization, and the AKP pledged to expand these liberties that women long sought for. The party pressed for gender equality in education and the workplace as well as in the religious sphere (Özkazanç, 2020). Moreover, its grassroots use of people and local governments to disseminate the party's agenda mobilized women on all fronts. The expansion of liberties by the AKP was popular among most women, not solely the religious facet.

Once in power, the party further appealed to conservative women with charismatic promises and reliance on trust. Women were encouraged to allow the party to "trust the party and care for the peace at home and not confront their husbands directly" (Özkazanç, 2020). The sentiment of women as caretakers was cultivated and compounded with the establishment of the Istanbul convention, which delivered legal protection to women who so frequently experience violence. The legal protections of women from violence seemingly kept the promise of safety and furthered trust among women.

Yet, as the party gained power, the protections that once increased their popularity eroded. In 2021, president Erdoğan withdrew from the Istanbul convention, symbolically and legally dissolving previous protections for women. Moreover, despite welfare policies that largely benefit women, president Erdoğan pushes rhetoric that displays the value of gender inequality. Sexist rhetoric condemns women that reject motherhood and do not elect to follow the prescribed social norms. Yet, women continue to make up a majority of Erdoğan's votes. A similar phenomenon was evidenced in the 2016 presidential election in the United States. In this case, a majority of white women elected former president Donald Trump though he commonly made sexist remarks about women (Miller-Idriss, 1). Cynthia Miller-Idriss argues that white women were mobilized "to support Trump because of the resonance of his campaign rhetoric with specific, gendered frameworks that seemed to place value on women's roles in the home"

(Miller-Idriss, 1). There exists an embrace among conservative women to protect the home and the family. The AKP created similar appeals to Turkish women by linking motherhood and femininity. Muslim women who sought to protect their traditional values found comfort in the protection of their ideals by the AKP.

Islamism, Populism, and the Female Vote

The intersection of each of the facets is crucial to understanding the sustained power of the regime. Two decades in power have allowed the AKP to cultivate a steadfast following among the conservative population. The party initially drew on ideals that would please women of all social cleavages. Yet, after achieving unrivaled popularity, the party slowly altered its agenda, cultivating a new divide between the religious and the secular population. The division became increasingly apparent among women as the discourse of political leaders praised the chaste, veiled sister and condemned the secular, modern woman (Özkazanç, 2020). Thus, the populist strategies of the AKP are revealed in two phases: the first is a call to the population for the revitalization of liberty, and the second is an appeal to the conservatives to defend morality. The appeal to women as mothers relies on the idea that women should be within the home and should stand against the moral erosion of society. In each phase, the appeals made by the AKP connected with the population's desire to protect against the corruption of the state. Moreover, the provisions of the welfare policy largely benefit the female population, which further increases support for the regime. Welfare policies evidence the actions by the state to aid the people, especially mothers. Once the regime legitimized its power through these tactics, the AKP sought to further influence society according to the Islamic tradition of gender roles. The party was able to impact women's participation in the labor force by passing and repealing policies that increased reliance on the husband. Thus, they limited women to ensure they would take their

rightful place in the home. The AKP then secured its power by limiting the balances of democratic institutions and allotting it to the presidency. Censorship, surveillance of the media, and crackdowns on dissent further contributed to democratic backsliding. Ultimately, the populist appeal to the Muslim population, specifically regarding the conservation of morality and Muslim ideologies, legitimized the support for the party. The party secured the support needed to change the government of the state and combine power in the leader, President Erdoğan.

United States: Rise of Populist Trumpism

Historically, populism has been a prominent facet of American politics. For decades, politicians in the United States have relied on the use of populism to capture hearts, minds, and votes among the polity (Applebaum, 2016). However, within the past decade, populist leadership under former president Donald Trump cultivated a fervent movement that culminated in a cult-like following and a democratic decline in the American government (Rachman 2022, p. 2). He garnered support as an outsider in the political sphere that has lost faith in “traditional political elites” (Ibid, p. 119). While the election of former president Trump demonstrated the ability of candidates from outside the political sphere to participate in and successfully win elections, it also evidenced the dangers of populist rhetoric to democracy (Freedom House, 2017; Rachman 2022, p. 1-3). The platform was saturated with populist characteristics that appealed to the religious nationalism and prejudices of Evangelicals and conservatives across the United States. He often portrayed himself as a defender of American values against a perceived threat from immigrants, particularly those from the southern U.S. border and Muslim-majority countries (Rachman 2022, p. 122; Amnesty INTL 2020).

Trump’s savior mentality was not only employed against immigrants; he frequently employed anti-establishment rhetoric highlighted by his claims of election fraud. This rhetoric and the claims largely increased polarization among the American people. Trump’s populist appeals were compounded by the prevalence of his social media usage and direct communication with his supporters. While under the leadership of former president Trump, the United States witnessed the regression of democratic norms and values via “partisan pressure on the electoral

process” (Freedom House, 2021). Moreover, throughout his career as a businessman and tenure as president, Trump has degraded and objectified women. Despite the false narratives, criticism of women, and mercurial politics, former president Trump managed to cultivate a deep-rooted following, divide the American people, and derail democracy in America.

Trump Era Populism

While populism is not new to American politics, it is becoming increasingly used among political leadership. In order to target conservative, Republican voters, Trump embraced the image of a newcomer who was not involved in traditional politics. This image distinguished him from his political competitors as someone who was not previously corrupted by the political sphere. Moreover, it illustrated his purported willingness to pursue policy protecting the American ideals that were rapidly being lost and the disillusioned American public supported this image. One way that white evangelical support for Trump can be explained is by analyzing the view of the majority of conservatives and evangelicals who are white Christian nationalists, particularly as it relates to the group’s romantic nostalgia and fears of an apocalyptic future.

Recently, more conservative voters have found themselves disillusioned by politicians and the transformation of American culture (Bartels 2020; PRRI 2023, p. 4). Dr. Bartels found that 50% of Republican voters agree that the “traditional American way of life is disappearing” and another 41% supported the idea that “a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands” (2020). Thus, the image of a savior from outside the political realm who pledged to protect and correct American society was easily accepted. Miller-Idriss suggests that “Trumpists view the lost Golden Age (typically depicted as the 1950s U.S.) as rooted in a moral decline, which could only be interrupted through a virtuous restoration in order to prevent the nation from coming to an apocalyptic end-times, populated by invaders and rapists

who threaten the purity of white women” (Miller-Idriss, p. 7). This “virtuous restoration” was an attempt to install nostalgic nationalism and it was to be provided by former President Trump and his pledge to “Make America Great Again” (Rachman 2017).

The perception of an existential crisis among values and security was critical to Trump’s campaign. Trump played into the fears of and cultivated an extremist perception of nation lost to immorality and corruption (Macwilliams 2016; Tankel 2020). This perverted image of crisis was furthered when “Trump alleged, falsely, that the nation was in the grip of organizers of terror – professional anarchists, violent mobs, arsonists, looters, criminals, rioters, Antifa, and others – who deserved lengthy prison sentences” (Tankel 2020). After furthering the perception that the United States is a nation facing an existential crisis, Trump proclaimed “I am your voice... I alone can fix it” (Applebaum 2016).

However, his appeals were not solely targeted at the fears and prejudices of the American people. Rather, President Trump employed populist tactics by recruiting devout, Evangelical Christian Mike Pence to be his vice president in the 2016 election. This companionship illustrated to the public a swift and absolute dedication to their ideals and values. As such, Pence’s “views on issues of gender, women’s reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ protections resonated strongly with the Christian right” (Miller-Idriss, p. 9). Strategically selecting a devout evangelical with a political history of conservative policy strengthened the perception of his promises to the voters.

Religious Nationalism in the United States

Though democracy is in decline throughout the world, religion is experiencing a global renaissance. The amalgamation of religion and politics has created several challenges internationally. In the United States, the resurgence of the Christian identity among the American

people is changing the political culture of the secular government. The revival is seen as long overdue to many Evangelical Christians, who have long sought a leader that will defend their values (Holder 2020; PRRI 2023, p. 23). Ultimately, American patriotism is becoming increasingly linked to Christian morality and anxiety among many conservatives (PRRI 2023, p. 4, 8; Bartels 2020).

The Christian nationalist movement poses some complexities in looking closely at the 2016 and 2020 elections. The Evangelical worldview and support for Donald Trump should be mutually exclusive because of the many scandals of the former president. Yet, despite his many controversies, Christians supported Donald Trump because they believed he would politically preserve their values. Holder and Josephson suggest that evangelicals are “more concerned with preserving its identity and power than it is with adhering to a doctrine” (2020). As such, the demographics of those who voted for Trump in the 2016 election were largely middle-class Evangelical Christians (Setzler 2018). Evangelicals represent a category of “born-again” Christians and though Trump had minimal biblical knowledge, a majority of Evangelicals supported his candidacy (Posner 2020, p. 9). Trump’s campaign drew on the crucial policies and beliefs that Evangelical Christians desired from a leader. He poised himself to be their voice and the protector of their religious freedoms by championing a sort of Christian Nationalism that is only mimicked by televangelists (Posner, 13-14). Thus, in spite of his sinful past, Evangelical Christians propped the former president up in a position in which he could act as their strongman.

The growth in the Christian Nationalist ideology is critical to understanding the results of the 2016 election, as well as the continued support of Trump. A study by Brookings and the Public Religion Research Institute examined the intersection of Christian nationalism and

democracy. The report posited that “White evangelical Protestants are more supportive of Christian nationalism than any other group” (PRRI, p. 9). Moreover, the research positively correlates Christian nationalism with Republican partisanship; adherents of this ideology are exponentially likely to hold favorable or extremely favorable views of former President Trump. According to the survey, adherents of Christian nationalism maintain that the Christian foundations of the state are critical to maintaining the state and laws should reflect Christian values. The same survey analyzed support of gender values and patriarchy among the American people. The results suggest that “One-third of Americans (33%) agree that ‘in a truly Christian family, the husband is the head of the household, and his wife submits to his leadership...’” while “Roughly half of Christian nationalism sympathizers (51%) and nearly seven in ten adherents (69%) agree” and support these values. Additionally, Christian nationalists are increasingly likely to believe that American society has become “too soft and feminine” (PRRI, p. 22). This view was frequently evidenced throughout Trump’s campaign (Glick 2019). Thus, the approval of and adherence to these gendered values partly illustrates the prejudices upheld by a majority of Trump supporters.

Gendered Politics

Another facet of Trump’s campaign success was his emphasis on strong masculine characteristics while criticizing his opposition as too feminine (Glick 2019). One study on gendered politics asserts that “Challenges to masculine power lead men to reassert masculinity via ‘masculine overcompensation,’ which can affect political and social attitudes (e.g., increasing support for war, anti-homosexual attitudes, and hostility toward women)” (Glick 2019). While some found these appeals and attributes unfavorable, Glick posits that “Masculine overcompensation would theoretically increase men’s favorability toward Trump, who explicitly

endorsed traditional masculine values through his demeanor and policy positions.” This favorability is not only found among men; rather, “characteristics that give women a greater stake in preserving male patriarchy – predicted women... favoring Trump” (Glick 2018). Thus, sexist individuals ought to favor a candidate who actively expresses similar attitudes. Given his misogynistic behavior and heteronormative masculinity, hostile sexists would likely view Trump as holding similar attitudes to themselves (Glick 2019). The perceived attack on traditional family and gender values, as well as his support if not blatant reinforcement of these sentiments appealed to many voters.

Since his first campaign, Trump employed ambivalent sexism to co-opt a group of voters with strict gender ideologies and traditional values. Throughout the first part of his term, he regularly appointed men three times more often than he appointed women (Phadke, 2017). Additionally, after over one year in office, he had yet to appoint a director for the Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women (Washington Post, 2018). Trump’s use of gender throughout his political career emphasized not only his beliefs but his commitment to conservative ideals. Within his first few months in office, the former president committed to attacks on reproductive rights by seeking to stack the Supreme Court with anti-choice judges (Ahmed, 2020). This attack was compounded with the removal of provisions for birth control under the Affordable Care Act at the moral discretion of the provider (Ahmed, 2020). The implementation of hostile sexism was further illustrated by the weakening of Title IX which protects female students from sexual harassment; under the new Title IX, the definition of harassment was narrowed, and the burden of proof requirement was increased, making it increasingly difficult for women to seek justice (Ahmed, 2020). Ultimately, the culmination of sexist language and policies by Trump and his administration not only appealed to supporters but

perpetuated systemic discrimination and oppression against women and marginalized communities.

Female Support of Trump

As illustrated, throughout his campaign and later tenure as President, Trump praised and reinforced traditional, or otherwise sexist, values. Despite that, the female vote played a critical role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. In fact, one study suggests that “women’s support for right-wing political mobilisation, populist nationalism, and Christian nationalism played a significant role in the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency in 2016” (Miller-Idriss, 9). While the simple answer to why women would continue to vote for Trump in spite of his sexist tendencies would appear to be religious sentiment, many studies suggest that female support is largely the result of prejudice and promise. Dr. Miller-Idriss suggests that “For white evangelical women, who are highly motivated by a perceived sense of moral and national decline in the face of rapid social, cultural, and demographic change, Trump has fulfilled promises that matter to them: appointing conservative judges, increasingly the likelihood of restrictions in federal abortion rights, and reducing protections for transgender and LGBTQ+ people” (p. 15). Moreover, studies overwhelmingly suggest that the most powerful reasons behind support for populism and strongman politics are sexist sentiment and racial tensions (Rachman 2022, p. 122; Setzler 2018).

A quantitative study by Dr. Setzler illustrated that while partisanship and religious sentiment were influences on voting habits, prejudice played a far more important role. Setzler posits that “[w]omen who supported Trump, for example, were more Republican than those who did not. However, and more importantly, they held sexist and racially resentful attitudes more similar to males supporting Trump than to their female counterparts supporting other

candidates.” Throughout his campaign, former president Trump exploited sexist fears and racial prejudices, and these sentiments shaped the opinion of and infatuated many supporters. Setzler's findings illustrates that “Females with the highest levels of racial resentment were more than four times as likely... to support Trump than those with the lowest levels of racial animosity... those with the highest levels of sexism were 54 percentage points... more likely to support Trump than those who expressed no sexist attitudes.” These studies evidence that the largest motivation for many female voters was prejudice.

Authoritarian Tendencies & Democratic Decline

Between the years 2017 and 2022, America's score on Freedom House's annual report dropped six points from 89 to 83. Throughout his time in office, Trump did not solely erode women's rights, he also launched an attack on American democracy. This attack began with the populist sentiment that “[he] alone can fix” the crisis America was facing and culminated in an attempt to overturn election results (Applebaum; Freedom House, 2022). Trump desired the power of a personalist authoritarian and he frequently praised those who executed this type of power. He often revealed this desire by befriending leaders like President Putin and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un (Cilliza, 2019). Moreover, he commended President Erdoğan in 2019, two years after his consolidation of power in the presidency, saying, "It's my honor to be with a friend of mine, somebody I've become very close to, in many respects, and he's doing a very good job: the President of Turkey” (Cilliza, 2019). These remarks were compounded by actions that began to erode institutions of liberal democracy like condemning the free press and propagating the idea of fake news (Rachman 2022, p.10-11). Moreover, he sought to disrupt the independent court system and often “castigated judges as biased if they ruled against him” (Ibid. p. 10-11). Finally, the former president instigated an attempt to overturn the result of the 2020

presidential election with claims of election fraud (Rachman, 2022 10-11). Thus, while claiming to have the best interest of the American people in mind, Trump repeatedly sought to undermine key democratic institutions.

Comparative Analysis

In looking closely at each state, there are clear similarities among the intersection of authoritarianism, populism, and gender within Turkey and the United States. One of the largest similarities that both former President Trump and President Erdoğan share is the manipulation of fear. This fear stems from the alleged loss of traditional values in each respective culture; however, fear and anxiety are exaggerated and securitized as an existential crisis. After drawing on fear in each culture, this crisis was compounded by religion, but the religious root is much deeper in Turkish society than in American society. Statistics reported above illustrate those supporters of Donald Trump, while largely evangelical Christians, were driven by prejudice more frequently than religion. Despite this, both leaders draw on the anxieties of the nation to gain support.

Drawing on the anxieties of a nation is only one of the tactics used to persuade voters. Both regimes gained power through the application of three common tactics used by modern-day autocrats: the creation of a cult personality, the installation of nostalgic nationalism, and the fabrication of a national crisis (Rachman 2017; Rachman 2022, p. 1). Erdoğan and Trump employed populist rhetoric throughout their campaigns and tenures in office to design this cult personality. Moreover, they each utilized a common nostalgic nationalism in their societies. The “Make America Great Again” movement evidenced this call to an American renaissance characterized by evangelical religious freedom and white supremacy. Similarly, Erdoğan’s return to Ottoman roots and erasure of its secular government has cultivated continuous support among the Muslim community. Finally, Erdoğan and Trump appeal to the idea of a national crisis; the crisis of invasion among corrupted elites and the attacks on traditional values. The culmination

of these attributes allowed for these men to rise in political leadership positions and appeal to particularly polarized groups of society.

Both Erdoğan and Trump have exhibited and been criticized for their sexist politics. Erdoğan has a history of making sexist remarks and has been attempted to limit women's rights in Turkey. In particular, he promotes conservative gender roles and repeatedly removed protections on domestic violence against women. Similarly, Trump has exhibited hostile sexist qualities via remarks and engaging in behavior that is disrespectful to women. During his, time in office, he implemented several policies that attempted to restrict access to abortion and contraception, as well as diminishing protections against sexual harassment. However, both leaders use criticism as examples of a culture war. Rachman's study suggests that these culture wars are installed as a distraction so that the leaders may grasp more power. Implementation and the installation of division allow polarized societies to be manipulated easier.

Conclusion

The rise of populism is a global phenomenon, and its impact on democracy is a significant concern. Populist leaders typically portray themselves as outsiders and champions of the working class, often using emotive and divisive language to resonate with their supporters. These leaders frequently scapegoat marginalized groups and institutions, categorizing them as distant from the people. Right-wing populism, in particular, emphasizes nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and a rejection of globalism. Leaders often target the perceived threats posed by globalization and the loss of jobs to foreign countries while emphasizing traditional values and gender roles. In Turkey and the United States, religion plays a significant role in developing right-wing populism. In Turkey, the conservative ruling party, the AKP, uses Islamism and right-wing populist strategies to maintain power. The party appeals to the religiosity of the Turkish people and portrays itself as the protector of traditional values and conservative gender roles.

Similarly, in the United States, former President Donald Trump used emotive and divisive language to appeal to his base. He emphasized his outsider status and portrayed himself as a champion of the working class. Trump's rhetoric often targeted marginalized groups and institutions, such as immigrants and the media. He also appealed to traditional values, emphasizing the importance of Christianity and conservative gender roles. The erosion of democratic institutions and electoral integrity is a significant concern in both Turkey and the United States. In Turkey, the AKP's authoritarian tendencies have led to the erosion of democratic norms, including the loss of protections for women. In the United States, Trump's refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election and his encouragement of the violent insurrection at the Capitol pose a significant threat to democracy. The case studies of Turkey and

the United States highlight the similarities and differences in the ways these countries' populist leaders use rhetoric and policy to appeal to women. Despite both leaders' attempts to diminish the rights of women, Erdoğan and Trump found a large support group of women.

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