Journal of Populism Studies (2026), pp. 1-31

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55271/JPS000128

Journal of Populism Studies

Article

The Orphan Paradox in India and the USA

Dinesh Sharma
Fordham University, NYC
dsharma4@fordham.edu

Gregory W. Streich
University of Central Missouri, MO
streich@ucmo.edu

Abstract
Why do some societies repeatedly elevate leaders marked by childhood loss, trauma, and adversity during periods of national crisis, while at other times they prefer leaders from established political, economic, and social elites? The Orphan Paradox explores a psychological, cultural, and developmental theory of democratic leadership that integrates developmental science, political history, economics, and personality theory to explain this recurring pattern in the United States and India. Drawing on biographical analyses of presidents and prime ministers from the eighteenth century to the present, the paper distinguishes between traumagenic outsiders—leaders whose identities were shaped by parental loss, family disruption, poverty, or other forms of early adversity—and patrician insiders, who emerged from stable, privileged, and institutionally embedded backgrounds. The central argument is that democratic electorates respond not only to policy preferences and economic conditions but also to symbolic narratives of resilience, authenticity, and continuity. During periods of war, economic inequality, institutional crisis, or social upheaval, voters are more likely to identify with leaders whose life histories embody hardship and recovery. Conversely, during periods of stability and prosperity, electorates tend to favor experienced insiders who represent institutional continuity, expertise, and elite governance. This dynamic produces a recurring epistemic or structural oscillation in democratic leadership between outsider reformers and insider custodians, which is not just a political phenomenon but a deeply psychological process.

Keywords: Orphan Paradox, Democratic Leadership, Political Psychology, Populism, Political Dynasties, Democratic Resilience, India, United States, Leadership

Dynastic Politics in India and the USA

In both India and the United States, political dynasties have played a defining role in shaping democratic leadership, revealing how personal lineage and inherited legitimacy continue to intersect with modern electoral politics (Dal Bó et al., 2009; Hess, 2016).[1] In India, the Nehru–Gandhi family has dominated Congress Party politics for decades, serving as the symbolic and organizational center of the party since independence (Brass, 1994; Guha, 2007). Beyond the Congress, regional parties often mirror this pattern, functioning as quasi-familial enterprises in which leadership succession passes through kinship lines—examples include the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, the Thackerays in Maharashtra, and the Karunanidhi family in Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2016; Wyatt, 2013; Palshikar & Kumar, 2004). These familial structures often blur the boundaries between public service and private inheritance, creating networks of loyalty that reinforce both political continuity and resistance to internal reform (Chandra, 2016).

The United States, though formally committed to competitive primaries and elections with open political participation, exhibits its own dynastic patterns. The Kennedys, Bushes, Roosevelts, and Adams–each representing distinct political eras and ideological lineages—have used family name recognition, donor networks, and the symbolic capital of service and sacrifice to sustain their influence across generations (Hess, 2016; Feinstein & Masur, 2020). More recently, the Trump

[1] This paper in large part is adapted from the forthcoming book, *The Orphan Paradox* (Sharma, 2026), which presents a detailed psychocultural, historical, and political analysis of leadership cycles in India and the US. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ECPS workshop on September 4. 2025. We thank Professor Akis Kalaitzidis for his comments on this paper and the book. We are also immensely grateful to Dr. Arturo G. Munoz, senior political scientist at RAND Corporation, Washington DC, for his commentary on this project. This paper was partly inspired by the contemporary rise of nationalism worldwide. An earlier version of the proposal was reviewed by Dr. Munoz, who suggested that the argument would benefit from a stronger engagement with current political developments. In particular, he encouraged a more explicit comparison between Narendra Modi and Donald Trump as contemporary leaders whose rise reflects broader global trends.

Parts of this paper were originally developed for an edited volume on WEIRD psychology, which critiques the overreliance on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations in psychological research (Joseph Henrich et al., 2010); the goal here is to show how democracy takes different forms in different contexts.

family's growing presence within Republican politics underscores how populism, too, can potentially become dynastic, converting media visibility and brand identity into a new form of hereditary legitimacy (Saldin & Teles, 2020; D'Antonio, 2015). Trump may be the first modern president to combine outsider populism with explicit aspirations toward patrician and founder-level historical status. He attacks existing dynasties (Bush, Kennedy) yet simultaneously attempts to create a new one and to place himself in the symbolic lineage of Washington, Lincoln, and other nation-defining presidents such as Jackson and McKinley.

Across both democracies, the enduring appeal of dynastic politics reflects a paradox: voters simultaneously profess faith in meritocracy while responding to the familiarity, continuity, and symbolic legitimacy that political families provide (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2011). Dynasties persist by drawing upon accumulated forms of capital—symbolic, financial, social, and emotional (Bourdieu, 1986)—yet their influence often weakens during periods of public disillusionment, corruption scandals, economic distress, or generational fatigue (Vaishnav, 2017). Dynastic politics thus functions as both a stabilizing and destabilizing force within democracy, embodying the tension between inherited privilege and democratic renewal.

Yet the counterpart to the dynastic heir is the political orphan or the outsider—the individual who possesses neither inherited status nor established networks of privilege. In many democracies, moments of political upheaval create opportunities for leaders whose authority derives not from lineage but from narratives of adversity, resilience, and personal struggle. Among the most striking of these figures are those who experienced significant childhood loss through parental death, family disruption, abandonment, or displacement. *The Orphan Paradox* proposed here, which constitutes our main thesis, suggests that early experiences of rupture may cultivate psychological characteristics—such as independence, ambition, resilience, and a heightened sensitivity to insecurity—that can later translate into political leadership.[2] Whereas dynastic leaders inherit political capital, orphan leaders are often compelled to construct it. Their biographies resonate with citizens who perceive themselves as marginalized, overlooked, or excluded from established systems of power. It allows outsiders, such as orphans, to speak for the people against the

[2] For a full treatment of the underpinning of psychological, cultural, and political arguments, see the book, *The Orphan Paradox* (Sharma, 2026).

establishment, as is evident in recent years in the populist turn and the rise of amateur politicians. In this sense, the orphan and the heir represent two competing pathways to political legitimacy: one rooted in inheritance and continuity, the other in adversity and self-creation.

The Orphan Paradox describes the condition of loss: the absence of foundational support—whether parental, institutional, cultural, or even genetic—creates a dual trajectory. On one hand, it heightens vulnerability to instability, alienation, and maladaptive coping; on the other, it can spark remarkable resilience, innovation, and self-determined leadership. This paradox applies across multiple domains of human experience, from individual psychology to political systems and technological development (Sharma, 2026, 2025).[3]

This paper examines these dynamics – the outsider and the heir, the orphan and the patrician – in two of the world's largest and most populous democracies, India and the United States, both of which emerged from profound historical ruptures and continue to grapple with competing demands for continuity and change (Moffitt, 2016; Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017). In particular, we connect the rise of Modi in India and Trump in the USA – two political populists, one of whom left home early as a teenager to seek spiritual renunciation and the other who carries the scars of a fraught relationship with his demanding and wealthy parents – with the current trend towards nationalists who take on corrupt elites on behalf of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Ironically, while in both India and the USA, there is a turn away from the familiar, stable, dynastic family names, both Modi and Trump are examples of how populists position themselves as outsiders seeking to become establishment insiders by creating their own autocracies or dynasties.

[3] The idea of *the Orphan Paradox* is interdisciplinary. First, developmental perspectives in leadership studies suggest that early experiences of trauma and loss can shape resilience, ambition, and identity formation over the life course. Work in political psychology and leadership analysis (e.g., Jerrold M. Post, 2003) highlights how formative adversity often informs leadership style and worldview. Second, my professional experience in the pharmaceutical sector exposed me to the concept of "orphan drugs" and "orphan markets," terms institutionalized through policy frameworks such as the Orphan Drug Act. These refer to conditions or markets that lack early institutional support yet later become sites of innovation and intervention.

Gilded Age Redux

In the era of globalization, the Gilded Age is making a striking comeback — not with railroads and steel barons, but with the rise of tech billionaires who now dominate the commanding heights of the global economy (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). Just as industrial magnates like Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt defined the late nineteenth century through their control of infrastructure and capital (Chandler, 1977), today's digital tycoons — from Silicon Valley to Bengaluru — are shaping a new world order built on data, algorithms, and platform economies (Srnicek, 2017). Wealth is being accumulated at a pace and scale unseen since that earlier gilded moment, while social inequality, political influence, and labor precarity deepen in parallel (Saez & Zucman, 2019; Susskind, 2020).

In the United States, figures like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg have become the new "robber barons," simultaneously admired for their innovation and criticized for their monopolistic power (Khan, 2017; Wu, 2016). They command not just industries but imaginations, wielding cultural, attentional, and political influence that often rivals — and sometimes eclipses — that of elected leaders (Zuboff, 2019). Their ventures extend into space, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence, recasting capitalism itself as a kind of technocratic frontier, where private ambition masquerades as global progress (Morozov, 2014). The old factory has been replaced by the data center; the assembly line by algorithm (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

In India, a parallel story unfolds. Tech entrepreneurs and industrialists — from Mukesh Ambani's Reliance empire to Gautam Adani's sprawling infrastructure conglomerate — represent a new phase of capitalist consolidation (Chatterjee, 2022; Jaffrelot, 2021). Start-up founders in Bengaluru and Gurugram, often educated abroad and fluent in global finance, echo the self-made mythology of Silicon Valley, yet their ascent is tightly interwoven with state patronage and nationalist narratives of self-reliance and "Digital India" (Upadhya, 2016). As in the US, the digital revolution promises empowerment but also deepens the divide between those who own the means of computation and those who merely provide the data that feeds it (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Across both nations, the echoes of the Gilded Age are unmistakable: the accumulation of vast wealth, philanthropy as image management, and the growing fusion of economic and political power (Reich, 2018; Giridharadas, 2018). The result is a world where democracy coexists uneasily

with oligarchy, and innovation is both a promise of liberation and an instrument of control (Freeland, 2012). In this sense, globalization has not erased history — it has recycled it. The new gilded elite are not captains of industry but architects of code, heirs to both ambition and inequality, writing the next chapter of capitalism's long and glittering return (Sassen, 2014).

Multipolarity vs Autocracies

Are we really living in a multipolar world — or in a world where autocrats are quietly uniting, not against one another, but against the common citizen? The language of geopolitics would have us believe that we have entered an era of balance and plural power — the "rise of the rest," the return of Asia, the diffusion of Western dominance (Zakaria, 2008; Acharya, 2014). Yet beneath the surface of multipolarity lies a more unsettling pattern: the convergence of strongmen, oligarchs, and illiberal populists who, despite national differences, share a common impulse — to consolidate control, weaken institutions, and redefine democracy itself in their own image (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

This new fraternity of autocrats is not bound by ideology but by instinct. They speak in the idioms of nationalism — promising pride, sovereignty, and restoration — but their methods betray a shared script: delegitimizing the press, weaponizing disinformation, undermining the judiciary, and recasting citizens as subjects (Gurri, 2018; Wedeen, 2019; Applebaum, 2024). From Washington to Moscow, New Delhi to Beijing, and Ankara to Budapest, the rhetoric may vary — cultural pride here, religious revival there, economic resurgence elsewhere — but the emotional register is strikingly similar: fear of outsiders, resentment of elites, suspicion of dissent, and nostalgia for a purer, imagined past (Snyder, 2018; Appadurai, 2017).

In this sense, the new "multipolar" world is less a rebalancing of power than a rearrangement of authoritarian habits. Leaders invoke the language of national destiny, yet they draw legitimacy from the same populist formula — the construction of a perpetual "enemy within" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Immigrants, minorities, journalists, and activists become convenient scapegoats in the theater of grievance that sustains autocratic rule (Gessen, 2017). What appears as nationalism is often a mask for deeper anxieties — the fear of losing control in an age of global flux, migration, and information transparency (Fukuyama, 2018). This, in turn, drives the fusion

of the new tech elite and populist leaders who seek to harness technology not to benefit citizens but to generate wealth and establish networks of control and surveillance.

Meanwhile, globalization — the very system that was once expected to spread liberal democracy — now enables these regimes to thrive. Autocrats invest in each other's economies, share surveillance technologies, and echo one another's rhetoric about sovereignty and "traditional values" (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2020; Feldstein, 2021). While democracy and free markets were ascendant after 1989, it is now democratic countries that see the importation of autocratic and illiberal trends and tendencies (Applebaum, 2024). Social media, which promised to democratize expression, has become the new tool of control and misinformation, blurring the line between propaganda and populism (Tufekci, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, democracy watchdogs such as V-Dem have found that the number of autocratic countries has exceeded that of democratizing countries in recent years (Nord et al., 2026).

Thus, the world's new power map may look multipolar, but the moral landscape is increasingly uniform. The great irony of our time is that as nations proclaim independence and self-determination, their leaders grow more alike — drawing strength not from citizens' empowerment, but from their fatigue and fear (Gurri, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2022). It is not the balance of power that defines this moment, but the balance between freedom and its erosion — a quiet global counterrevolution in which autocrats, each cloaked in national flags, stand united in their defense of power against their own people (Krastev & Holmes, 2020). Ironically, while these autocrats invoke national pride and glorious histories, they have established global networks and alliances that have formed a new anti-globalist global elite (Applebaum, 2024). And, Modi and Trump (along with other leaders such as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Russia's Putin, and Saudi Arabia's Monammed bin Salman) are ushering in an emerging global order of "neo-royalism" that is constituted by cliques of elite businesses, with political, capital, and military connections devoted to individual sovereigns, taking control of durable status hierarchies that are extracting financial and cultural tributes, which is displacing the rules based international order built on the Westphalian system (Goddard & Newman, 2025: 13).

Big Business in Politics

In modern democracies, the ballot box still symbolizes popular sovereignty — yet the real currency of politics is money. Across continents, from Washington to New Delhi, from Brasília to Brussels, the influence of big business has quietly redefined the nature of political participation and representation (Ganuthula & Balaraman, 2025). Campaign financing — once a means of supporting political expression — has become a structural mechanism through which economic power translates directly into political authority (Melo et al., 2018).

In the United States, the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* marked a turning point. By equating corporate spending with free speech, the Court opened the floodgates for unlimited corporate and union expenditures in political campaigns (Public Citizen, 2020; Citizens, 2020). The ruling redefined the relationship between money and democracy: corporations could now spend freely to influence elections, legislation, and public opinion, without direct accountability. The result has been an era of "dark money" — massive, often untraceable political expenditures by super PACs and front organizations that amplify the voices of the wealthy while muting those of ordinary citizens (Traag 2016; Jain & Wood, 2020). The American democratic process, once idealized as a contest of ideas, now increasingly resembles an auction of interests.

India, meanwhile, offers a parallel — and equally revealing — case. The Electoral Bonds Scheme, introduced in 2018, was ostensibly designed to make political donations more transparent. In practice, it institutionalized opacity. Corporations and individuals could purchase bonds from a bank and donate them anonymously to political parties (India Today, 2024; Economic Times, 2024). The result was a massive channeling of funds toward the ruling party, consolidating an unprecedented nexus between business interests and political power (Financial Express, 2024; Hindustan Times, 2024). When the Supreme Court of India struck down the scheme in 2024, it did more than expose financial irregularities — it illuminated the quiet corrosion of democratic equality (Indian Express, 2024). In a system where access to decision-makers is purchased rather than earned, the voice of the voter grows faint.

This pattern is not confined to the world's largest democracies. Across Latin America, Europe, and parts of Africa, corporate lobbying and elite financing have become the lifeblood of political

machinery (Ganuthula & Balaraman, 2025; Sassen, 2014; Freeland, 2012). In Brazil, construction giants and energy conglomerates have financed entire political careers — and toppled governments through corruption scandals. In the United Kingdom, hedge fund donors shape party platforms; in the European Union, lobbying consortia swarm Brussels with near-state-level influence. Even in ostensibly populist movements that rail against "global elites," the financiers behind the scenes often belong to the very economic class these movements claim to resist (Reich, 2018; Giridharadas, 2018).

What emerges from this global landscape is a new kind of democratic contradiction. Elections remain free, but they are rarely fair in terms of influence. Political advertising, data-driven microtargeting, and corporate-funded media ecosystems have turned electoral politics into a sophisticated marketplace (Zuboff, 2019; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). The line between persuasion and manipulation blurs, as campaigns are designed not to inform citizens, but to engineer emotional responses — financed, in large part, by interests that profit from maintaining the status quo (Tufekci, 2017; Jain & Wood, 2020). And, in countries in which populist and autocratic rulers have emerged, an additional level of democratic manipulation–gerrymandering or electoral rules that exclude important challengers–serves to enhance the political power of the ruling party, resulting in the emergence of "competitive authoritarian" states that have the facade of democracy but without the substance of meaningful voter choice and input (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

In this age of *"post-democratic capitalism,"* big business does not need to overthrow democracy; it merely needs to outspend it and co-opt it. The transactional nature of campaign financing ensures that policy priorities — from environmental deregulation to labor law reform — are shaped not by public deliberation, but by private negotiations and the interests of large campaign donors (Saez & Zucman, 2019; Sassen, 2014; Page et al., 2013). The global consequence is subtle but profound: a narrowing of the democratic imagination. When money determines access to power, the political horizon shrinks, and citizens cease to be participants in democracy — they become its audience, often seduced by charismatic or demagogic leaders (Freeland, 2012; Egidi, 2023; Ganuthula & Balaraman, 2025).

Thus, the real story of modern governance is not just about leaders or ideologies, but about the invisible architecture of influence that sustains them. Whether through super PACs in the US, electoral bonds in India, or corporate lobbying in Europe, the logic remains constant: power follows money, and money seeks power. In either case, citizens and their concerns are sidelined, even while populists appeal to their interests in the name of battling the very entrenched elites who influence policies in ways that diverge from what citizens want.

Mechanisms of Influence: How Power Persuades

Democracy, in theory, rests on the principle of accountability — that those who govern must answer to those who are governed (Dahl, 1989; Sen, 2009). Yet in the real world of twenty-first-century politics, accountability often travels a different route: through boardrooms, media houses, and lobbying corridors (Schlozman et al., 2012; Drutman, 2015). What sustains the power of big business and entrenched elites is not merely wealth, but the intricate web of mechanisms of influence through which economic capital is converted into cultural legitimacy and political control (Bourdieu, 1991; Winters & Page, 2009; Gilens & Page, 2014).

In an age defined by information, those who control the media control perception — and perception, in politics, is power (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The consolidation of media ownership has allowed a handful of families and conglomerates to shape national narratives, frame public debate, and filter dissent (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2015). In India, the Ambani conglomerate's expanding media empire exerts influence across television, print, and digital platforms, subtly aligning public discourse with corporate and political interests (Thussu, 2018; Jeffrey, 2019). Similarly, in the Anglophone world, Rupert Murdoch's media networks — from *Fox News* in the United States to *The Sun* and *The Times* in the UK and *The Australian* — have not only reported on politics but also *made* politics, shaping electoral outcomes and ideological climates (McKnight, 2012; Freedman, 2014; Stiegler, 2021). Additionally, in the US, Larry Ellison and his son, David Ellison, both allies of Donald Trump, have not only acquired partial ownership of TikTok, but also outright ownership of CBS and CNN, which gives them unprecedented power to influence the degree of journalistic independence those outlets enjoy and the extent to which they will pursue investigative journalism to hold those in power accountable.

Such concentration of media power transforms journalism from a public good into a strategic asset (Pickard, 2019). When headlines, newsrooms, and editorial lines are guided by the logic of profit or political alignment, the boundary between information and propaganda begins to erode (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). What appears to be a free press becomes a managed democracy — a system in which freedom of expression and the public sphere exist in form but not in substance (Habermas, 1989; Couldry & Turow, 2014). Citizens consume curated narratives crafted to sustain existing hierarchies and the preferred policies of political elites rather than challenge them (Fenton, 2016).

Policy Capture: Writing the Rules from the Top Down

If the media shapes how citizens think about politics, policy capture determines how they experience it. Corporate lobbying — the art of writing the rules while pretending to obey them — is one of the most sophisticated and least visible mechanisms of influence in the modern state (Stigler, 1971; Carpenter & Moss, 2014). Through well-funded lobbying groups, think tanks, and trade associations, corporations shape legislation on taxation, labor, environment, and trade (Drutman, 2015; Hacker & Pierson, 2010).

In the United States, fossil fuel companies have long financed campaigns and policy institutes to delay climate action, framing regulation as an economic threat rather than a planetary necessity (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Supran & Oreskes, 2021). Pharmaceutical giants influence drug pricing and patent laws through aggressive lobbying and campaign donations (Angell, 2004; Kremer & Williams, 2010). In India, powerful business groups shape tax breaks, land acquisition laws, and industrial deregulation in ways that consolidate their dominance while sidelining small entrepreneurs and workers (Kohli, 2012; Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Rajan, 2020). These are not isolated incidents, but structural patterns embedded in the architecture of contemporary capitalism.

No democracy is self-sustaining. Its vitality depends not merely on the architecture of institutions, but on the everyday actions of citizens, social movements, and independent voices who contest the capture of power by elites (Putnam, 1993; Tilly, 2004; Dahl, 1989). Across history, when formal politics tilts toward oligarchy or autocracy, it is often civil society — that messy, vibrant, and unruly domain between state and market — that reasserts the moral compass of democracy (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Keane, 2009; Sen, 2009).

From the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to the anti-corruption protests led by Anna Hazare in India, grassroots movements have repeatedly reminded both nations that the legitimacy of democracy lies not in dynasties, corporate lobbies, or populist leaders — but in the collective will of ordinary citizens (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 2011; Shah, 2018). These movements, often born in moments of deep moral crisis, reveal democracy's capacity for self-correction. The American Civil Rights Movement exposed the hypocrisy of liberty without racial equality (Branch, 1988; Morris, 1984), while India's anti-corruption protests challenged the normalization of graft and elite impunity in public life (Aiyar & Sircar, 2015; Yadav, 2012).

Such movements do not always translate into immediate structural change, but they perform a deeper function: they reawaken democratic consciousness. They push citizens to imagine freedom not merely as a constitutional promise, but as a lived, participatory experience (Putnam, 1993; Cohen & Arato, 1992). Whether through labor unions, feminist movements, student protests, or environmental activism, civil society functions as the conscience of the democratic state — its capacity for self-critique and renewal (Keane, 2009; Edwards, 2014).

Independent Institutions: The Architecture of Accountability

Yet civil society alone cannot sustain democracy without strong, independent institutions. Courts, election commissions, and a genuinely free press serve as the formal scaffolding that holds power to account (O'Donnell, 1994; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). When these institutions function with integrity, they create friction against authoritarian drift — transforming personal ambition into lawful competition, and dissent into dialogue rather than treason (Diamond, 2019).

India's Supreme Court and Election Commission, for instance, have at times acted as bulwarks against executive overreach (Mehta, 2003; Jayal, 2013). Similarly, in the United States, the judiciary and the press have historically constrained presidential excesses, from Watergate to recent investigations into political corruption and electoral interference (Schudson, 2004; Ginsberg & Shefter, 1990). But when these institutions are weakened — through partisan appointments, intimidation, or the erosion of an independent media and judiciary — the balance of power tips decisively toward autocracy, as it has in countries such as Turkey and Hungary (Bermeo, 2016; Freedom House, 2023).

Populism and the Paradox of Anti-Elite Politics

Ironically, the rise of populism in the twenty-first century often stems from a crisis of representation within these very institutions (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Leaders like Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) have mobilized widespread resentment against "dynasties," "corrupt elites," and "out-of-touch intellectuals" (Jaffrelot, 2021; Hochschild, 2016; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Their appeal lies in their promise to restore dignity to the "common man," a hallmark of contemporary populist discourse (Laclau, 2005; de la Torre, 2017). Yet, as our broader argument suggests, this populist moment contains a deep paradox: while denouncing elites, such leaders often construct new hierarchies — networks of loyalists, corporations, and media allies that reproduce the very systems of privilege they once vowed to dismantle (Banerjee, 2018; Tufekci, 2018). In short, outsiders can become the new elites by capturing – and transforming – governing institutions.

In the end, civil society, independent institutions, and populist energies represent three competing — and sometimes complementary — forces within modern democracy (Habermas, 1996; Diamond, 2019). Civil society demands change from below; institutions enforce accountability from within; populists channel anger from above. The question is whether these energies converge to revitalize democracy — or collide to undermine it (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Indeed, the fluidity among these three energies has led to democratic backsliding and the emergence of competitive authoritarianism on the one hand, but also to the reemergence of democracy by civil society forces seeking to reinstate the rule of law on the other (e.g., recent dynamics in Hungary and Poland in which autocratic parties have lost to coalitions that pushed back against corruption to reinstate the rule of law).

Dynasties, Corporations, and the Orphan Disruptors: The Gravitational Politics of Democracy

Democracy, in theory, promises equality of opportunity — a system where power flows upward from the people, not downward through lineage or wealth. Yet, in practice, democracies often find themselves orbiting around powerful centers of inheritance (Winters, 2011; Khan, 2012). Political dynasties and corporate empires form the twin pillars of institutionalized power: one reproduces

political legitimacy through bloodlines; the other consolidates influence through capital (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Dal Bó et al., 2009). Together, they ensure that privilege is never fully displaced, merely reshaped across generations (Bourdieu, 1986; Mills, 1956).

In India, the Nehru–Gandhi family, regional political clans, and business houses such as the Ambanis and Adanis form an ecosystem of inherited influence—political, economic, and symbolic (Jaffrelot, 2021; Vaishnav, 2017; Gupta, 2011). In the United States, families like the Kennedys and Bushes are complemented by corporate dynasties that dominate campaign financing, lobbying, and media narratives (Ferguson, 1995; Gilens & Page, 2014). These familial and financial lineages sustain what might be called a "democratic aristocracy," where the language of the people masks the continuity of power among the few (Mann, 2012; Winters, 2011).

And yet, the democratic story is never one of pure continuity. Against these gravitational centers rise the orphaned outsiders — leaders who emerge not from the privilege of inheritance but from its absence. They are the self-made disruptors, shaped by early loss, social displacement, or moral alienation from the elite order (Sharma, 2012, 2016, 2025; McAdams, 2016). Their legitimacy derives not from blood or wealth but from struggle — from having suffered, endured, and risen. Orphan leaders often channel their trauma into a moral mission, claiming to restore authenticity, justice, or national dignity against an entrenched establishment (de la Torre, 2017; Jaffrelot, 2021).

These outsiders represent democracy's counterforce, injecting volatility and renewal into systems prone to stagnation. Figures like Abraham Lincoln, who rose from poverty and early loss (McPherson, 1992), or Narendra Modi, who framed his rise as that of a self-made outsider confronting India's entrenched dynasties (Andersen & Damle, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2021), exemplify this dynamic. They embody democracy's yearning for rebirth — the belief that virtue can emerge from adversity.

But democracy's pendulum rarely rests. It oscillates between the gravitational pull of inherited capital — dynastic, corporate, institutional — and the centrifugal energy of the orphan outsider. Each pole feeds the other: dynasties sustain stability but risk ossification; outsiders spark renewal but risk excess (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). And, in some cases, outsiders such as Modi and Trump attempt to establish their own dynasties or autocracies with centralized power and control. The health of a democracy lies not in the elimination of either, but

in its capacity to balance both — to allow inheritance without entitlement, and disruption without destruction.

Ultimately, the question is not whether democracies are ruled by dynasties or driven by outsiders, but whether institutions and citizens can resist capture — by money, by myth, or by the seductions of populist redemption (Norris, 2017; Diamond, 2019). The fate of democracy depends on whether its orbit bends toward renewal or relapse, toward shared power or inherited privilege.

The Orphan Paradox in Democracies

Democracy, at its heart, is a restless system — forever swinging between competing archetypes of power: the orphaned outsiders and the entrenched elites (Mills, 1956; Khan, 2012). Each embodies a distinct moral and political energy. The orphan represents rupture, renewal, and moral authenticity (McAdams, 2016; de la Torre, 2017); the elite stands for continuity, order, and institutional memory (Bourdieu, 1986; Winters, 2011). When one archetype exhausts its legitimacy, the pendulum swings toward the other — capturing the cyclical rhythm of democratic life itself (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

In both India and the United States, this tension plays out with remarkable regularity. The orphan leader — literal or symbolic — emerges as an outsider, someone who rises not through inheritance but through self-making (Jaffrelot, 2021; Andersen & Damle, 2018; McAdams, 2016). Their strength lies in biography: in stories of deprivation, struggle, or alienation that translate into public empathy (McPherson, 1992; McAdams, 2016). They embody resilience and authenticity, qualities that resonate in moments of social unrest, inequality, or political fatigue where citizens seek outsiders not tainted by the status quo (Norris, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). Figures like Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama, and Narendra Modi derive much of their legitimacy from the perception that they earned their place in history rather than inherited it (McPherson, 1992; Obama, 2006; Jaffrelot, 2021). Their rise signals a popular yearning for moral renewal — a desire to break free from the complacency and corruption of entrenched elites (Ferguson, 1995; Gilens & Page, 2014).

By contrast, the entrenched elite represents the other pole of the democratic pendulum. These are the dynasties, patricians, and establishment figures whose power flows through lineage, capital, and institutional continuity (Dal Bó et al., 2009; Chhibber & Verma, 2018). In the US, the Adams,

Kennedys, and Bushes symbolize this inheritance; in India, the Nehru–Gandhi family, regional political dynasties, and industrial titans play a similar role (Vaishnav, 2017; Jaffrelot, 2021). Their legitimacy derives not from struggle but from stewardship — the promise of experience, education, and global networks that stabilize the democratic order (Mann, 2012; Winters, 2011). Yet, as history shows, when their grip grows too tight, when governance turns into entitlement, the democratic spirit rebels (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mudde, 2004).

The pendulum thus swings: when elites dominate, and the gap between rulers and the ruled widens, citizens seek redemption through the orphan figure — the self-made leader who promises to restore authenticity and justice on behalf of the people (de la Torre, 2017; Moffitt, 2016). This dynamic is more intense when the orphan figure deploys populist rhetoric against the entrenched elites who are portrayed as betraying the interests of the country and the common man. But when the orphan's populism hardens into demagoguery, or when disruption yields instability, democracies retreat to the reassurance of experience, wealth, and order — the familiar hands of the elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The pendulum is thus bracketed by democratic guardrails, continuity, and familiarity on one hand, and renewal, innovation, and populist passions on the other.

This cyclical dance is the essence of *The Orphan Paradox*: democracies depend on both forces. The orphan injects vitality and moral purpose; the elite provides structure and continuity (Winters, 2011; Mann, 2012). One without the other leads to imbalance — renewal without roots or stability without soul. In the long view, the democratic pendulum's enduring motion between these archetypes is not a symptom of crisis but a sign of life — proof that democracy, however fragile, remains capable of self-correction and rebirth (Diamond, 2019; Norris, 2017). What remains to be seen are the legacies of Modi and Trump: will their populist and outsider energies continue to transform their respective countries into something more like illiberal democracies or competitive authoritarianism? Will they, as outsiders, form new dynasties, thereby becoming the elites they once criticized? Or will democratic guardrails assert themselves, and civil society, the media, and the courts prevent their excesses?

The Orphan Paradox in India: Between Dynasties and Self-Made Outsiders

India's democracy offers one of the richest case studies of the orphan paradox — the tension between inherited power and outsider leadership. From the moment of its founding, the Indian Republic has oscillated between dynastic continuity and insurgent renewal, between those born into the institutions of power and those who rise from its margins (Khilnani, 1999; Guha, 2007).

The orphan figure in Indian politics is both literal and symbolic. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, though not orphaned as a child, experienced profound emotional loss and separation during his formative years, particularly after the death of his father in adolescence. His lifelong asceticism and search for moral purity can be read as a spiritual response to those early fractures (Erikson, 1969; Parekh, 1997). Gandhi's orphanhood, in this broader sense, became the nation's — his call for *swaraj* was as much a psychological project of moral regeneration as a political movement against empire (Parel, 2000).

Decades later, Indira Gandhi would embody a parallel pattern of loss and transformation: the death of her mother at a young age and her emotional isolation as Jawaharlal Nehru's only child forged in her a fierce will to survive and dominate (Frank, 2001; Guha, 2011). She turned her orphaned vulnerability into steely authority, transforming the Congress Party into a personal vehicle of control and charisma (Brass, 1994).

Narendra Modi represents a more contemporary iteration of the orphan archetype — the self-fashioned orphan. Born into a modest family of teasellers, estranged from his wife, and largely self-educated, Modi cultivated a narrative of sacrifice, discipline, and self-reliance that resonated with millions of Indians (Andersen & Damle, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). His rise marked a decisive break from the patrician lineage of the Nehru–Gandhi era. Modi's biography, and the mythology built around it, symbolized the ascent of an India tired of elite entitlement — an India that saw in him a mirror of its own struggles for dignity and recognition (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

In contrast stand India's entrenched elites — dynasties that have long defined the subcontinent's political grammar. The Nehru–Gandhi family has dominated Congress politics across generations, transforming democratic institutions into instruments of familial succession (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000). Around them orbit a constellation of regional dynasties: the Yadavs of Uttar Pradesh, the

Table 1: The Emotional Logic of Indian Political Cycles

Period	Dominant Type	Prime Minister	Parent Lost Separation	Age at Loss / Separation	Public Sentiment	Relevance to Orphan Paradox
1947–1966	Patrician	Jawaharlal Nehru	None documented	Father frequently jailed during freedom movement	Faith in elite institution-building	Elite founder; patrician archetype rather than orphan archetype
1964–1966	Transitional	Lal Bahadur Shastri	Father	1	Desire for simplicity, sacrifice, and national unity	Classic orphan leader; father died in infancy
1966–1977	Authoritarian Patrician	Indira Gandhi	Mother	17	Centralization of power; later backlash	Late parental loss combined with dynastic inheritance
1977–1980	Outsider Corrective	Morarji Desai	Father	14	Anti-dynastic corrective after Emergency	Outsider figure shaped by adolescent parental loss
1980–1984	Return of Dynasty	Indira Gandhi	Mother	17	Desire for stability and continuity	Return of dynastic legitimacy
1984–1989	Dynastic Successor	Rajiv Gandhi	Father	16	Modernization and national sympathy after assassination	Loss of father during adolescence reinforced succession narrative
1989–1990	Outsider Reformer	V. P. Singh	Adopted; adoptive father later died	Infancy	Anti-corruption movement	Symbolic orphan through adoption and displacement
1991–1996	Outsider Technocrat	P. V. Narasimha Rao	Adopted in childhood; no verified parental loss	3 (adoption)	Economic reform and liberalization	Separation from natal family may have shaped adaptive identity
2004–2014	Patrician-Technocratic Coalition	Manmohan Singh	Mother	6 months	Stability and economic growth	Early maternal loss; raised by relatives; resilience narrative
2014–Present	Outsider Populist	Narendra Modi	Left home as youth, no parental death	17	Rejection of dynasty; nationalist turn	Symbolic self-orphaning through renunciation and separation from family

Thackerays of Maharashtra, the DMK's Karunanidhi–Stalin lineage in Tamil Nadu. These families fuse political power with kinship, ensuring continuity through bloodline rather than ideology (Chandra, 2016). Their survival reflects India's deep cultural comfort with hierarchical inheritance — the same logic that underpins social caste systems and royal traditions (Dirks, 2001).

Yet, the Indian electorate remains restlessly democratic. The pendulum has swung repeatedly — from the Nehru–Gandhi dominance of the early republic, to the outsider challenge of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, to the populist insurgency of Narendra Modi (Hansen, 1999; Vaishnav, 2017). Each swing reflects the same psychic pattern: the orphan challenging the family, the outsider confronting the system. But the cycle never ends. As populists consolidate power, they often construct new forms of dynasty — symbolic, ideological, or institutional (Jaffrelot, 2021). In time, the "outsider" becomes the new establishment, setting the stage for the next orphan to rise.

Thus, the story of India's democracy is not merely political; it is deeply psychological and cyclical by nature — a struggle between memory and renewal, inheritance and reinvention, the family dynasty and the orphaned outsider (see Table 1).

The Orphan Paradox in America: Between the Founding Families and the Outsider's Dream

The United States, often celebrated as the land of self-made individuals, has long oscillated between two powerful archetypes of leadership — the orphaned outsiders and the patrician elites. The orphan embodies resilience, reinvention, and democratic authenticity; the patrician represents continuity, privilege, and institutional mastery. Throughout American history, the presidency itself has been a theater in which these two forces — inheritance and self-creation — contend for moral and political legitimacy (Hofstadter, 1948; Schlesinger, 1978).

Among America's orphan figures, Abraham Lincoln stands as the foundational myth. Losing his mother at nine and growing up under a distant, stern father, Lincoln's early life was marked by deprivation and solitude (Donald, 1995; White, 2009). Yet, from that hardship emerged one of the most extraordinary moral imaginations in political history. His compassion for the marginalized, his melancholy depth, and his moral clarity during the Civil War all bear the imprint of loss transmuted into purpose (Williams, 2007; Goodwin, 2005). Lincoln's life gave rise to what might

be called the American archetype of the "orphan savior" — the leader who redeems the fractured family of the nation.

A century later, Bill Clinton would embody a modern version of this same archetype. Born after his father's death and raised by a single mother in small-town Arkansas, Clinton's childhood was shaped by instability and an abusive stepfather (Maraniss, 1995; Branch, 2016). His story, too, became a tale of upward striving — of intelligence and charm overcoming circumstance. Clinton's blend of empathy, ambition, and charisma spoke to a nation eager for hope and renewal after the Cold War (D'Antonio, 2010). But as with Lincoln, the same emotional complexity that fueled his rise also shadowed his presidency — an unresolved tension between longing for belonging and the peril of self-indulgence (Troy, 2013).

Barack Obama's story reanimated the orphan myth for the twenty-first century. Raised without his Kenyan father and suspended between racial, cultural, and national identities, Obama transformed personal fragmentation into a universal message of hope and reconciliation (Mann, 2012; Remnick, 2010). His *Dreams from My Father* was not just a memoir — it was a meditation on identity as destiny. The absence of a father became the moral nucleus of his political persona, shaping a leadership style grounded in reflection, empathy, and bridge-building (Garrow, 2017). Like Lincoln, Obama made private pain the seed of public healing, turning the orphan's longing for wholeness into a civic ideal.

Against these orphaned outsiders stand America's entrenched elites: the Adams, Roosevelts, Kennedys, and the Bushes — dynasties whose names evoke inherited power, social networks, and institutional familiarity. Their political authority flows as much from mythic family narratives as from individual merit (Kabaservice, 2012; Smith, 2014). The Kennedys turned personal tragedy into civic sainthood (Dallek, 2003). The Bushes embodied patrician duty and continuity of the establishment (Meacham, 2015). Around them orbit older and newer forms of inherited power — from the Rockefellers of the industrial age to today's billionaires and mega-donors who shape policy through campaign financing and media influence (Ferguson, 1995; Gilens & Page, 2014). The American pendulum swings between these two poles — the insider and the outsider, the family heir and the self-made reformer. After the patrician order of the Roosevelts and Kennedys came the orphan insurgencies of Reagan, Clinton, and Obama (Greenstein, 2009; Troy, 2013).

Table 2: The Emotional Logic of the American Political Cycles

Era	Outsider / Traumagenic Leadership	Insider / Patrician Leadership
Early Republic (1789–1800)	George Washington (father died at 11; self-made military leader)	John Adams (Harvard-trained lawyer; New England elite)
Jeffersonian Era (1801–1828)	Thomas Jefferson (father died at 14; intellectual outsider despite planter status); James Monroe (orphaned in adolescence; Revolutionary War veteran); Andrew Jackson (orphaned, frontier upbringing, anti-elite populist)	James Madison (Princeton; constitutional architect); John Quincy Adams (political dynasty; Harvard-educated, first father-son duo elected)
Antebellum Era (1829–1860)	William Henry Harrison (father died at 18; military hero); John Tyler (mother died at 7)	Elite Whig leadership including presidents such as Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce reflected stronger establishment ties than Jacksonian populists, though this period is mixed.
Civil War & Reconstruction	Abraham Lincoln (mother died at 9; frontier self-education); Ulysses S. Grant (modest origins; military rise)	Franklin Pierce (elite, Bowdoin College, establishment)
Progressive Era (1897–1929)	Theodore Roosevelt (elite background but reinvented himself as a reforming "cowboy" outsider, lost father at 19)	William Howard Taft (Yale; judicial and political establishment)
Great Depression & World War II	Herbert Hoover (orphaned at 9; self-made engineer)	Franklin D. Roosevelt (Hyde Park patrician; political dynasty, lost father at 18)
Cold War (1953–1968)	Dwight D. Eisenhower (political outsider, institutional insider through the military)	John F. Kennedy (dynastic wealth; Harvard; establishment family)
Post-Watergate (1970s–1980s)	Jimmy Carter (small-town outsider); Ronald Reagan (modest Midwestern origins; outsider to Washington politics)	George H. W. Bush (Yale, CIA, dynastic)
Post-Cold War (1990s–2008)	Bill Clinton (father died before birth; difficult childhood; self-made politician)	George W. Bush (political dynasty; second father-son duo elected)
Great Recession (2008–2016)	Barack Obama (absent father; mixed-race background; outsider narrative)	Donald Trump (economic insider, political outsider in campaign style); billionaire, aspiring patrician
Populist Era (2016–Present)	Joe Biden (longtime history of personal losses and resilience, Senate insider)	Trump second-term, second president elected non-sequentially, fits as a socioeconomic elite; yet connects with the nationalist masses

Then, in an ironic twist, came Donald Trump, one part orphan, one part patrician. As an heir to a wealthy but demanding father, Trump's career as a business and real estate tycoon turned reality television star positioned him far from the elite circles of political power. Despite his wealth and elite economic status, Trump adopted an outsider identity, not just as someone born in the outer borough of Queens who sought entry into elite New York circles but also as a political populist channeling his resentments and grievances that were shared by many Americans who rallied behind his Make America Great Again and America First slogans. While economically a patrician yet politically an outsider, Trump channels populist resentment against the very elite networks from which he had long benefited (Saldin & Teles, 2020).

While not an orphan in the traditional sense, Trump's niece, psychologist Mary L. Trump (2020), argues that a prolonged maternal illness during his second year of life created an early experience of emotional abandonment at a critical stage of attachment formation. At this stage, he was cared for by household help and other siblings. With an elite, wealthy background, Trump is an aspiring patrician. Unlike orphan outsiders, whose moral authority often rests on narratives of overcoming adversity and identifying with collective suffering, Trump's public persona emphasizes success, strength, wealth, and personal achievement. As such, he is the archetype of a businessman, despite starting his career with a sizable inheritance from his father. Thus, while Trump may evoke nationalist dreams among his followers, he is a patrician insider who is potentially establishing his own dynastic lineage in politics.

In each cycle, America's democratic imagination replays its founding myth: the orphan outsider who rises up against the establishment, only to become part of it. The republic renews itself through these alternating waves — dynasties providing continuity, outsiders offering disruption, and the public, in turn, oscillating between nostalgia for order and hunger for reinvention (Hofstadter, 1948; Skowronek, 1997). In this sense, the Orphan Paradox is woven into the very fabric of American democracy: a system that celebrates independence but cannot escape its fascination with inheritance, that venerates the self-made individual even as it bows to the enduring power of business prowess and elite family names

Conclusion

The history of the American presidency suggests that democratic leadership is not merely a contest between competing policies or parties, but between competing biographies and deeply held psychological narratives. Across two centuries, the United States has repeatedly elevated leaders whose personal stories embody either inheritance or rupture, continuity or reinvention. On one side stand the dynasties—the Adamses, Roosevelts, Kennedys, Bushes, and now, potentially, the Trumps—whose legitimacy derives from accumulated political capital, family networks, and institutional continuity. On the other stand the orphans or the outsiders—Lincoln, Jackson, Hoover, Clinton, Obama, and others—whose authority emerges not from inheritance but from adversity, resilience, and self-creation. The tension between these archetypal forces reflects a deeper contradiction within American democracy itself: a nation founded on equality of opportunity yet persistently drawn to the power of lineage and family prestige (Hofstadter, 1948; Skowronek, 1997).

The Orphan Paradox suggests that early experiences of loss may constitute one of the hidden engines of democratic leadership. Childhood bereavement, parental absence, family instability, and social displacement often generate profound psychological challenges, yet they may also cultivate unusual capacities for adaptation, ambition, empathy, and self-reliance. The same wounds that produce vulnerability may simultaneously produce resilience. Leaders shaped by rupture frequently develop an acute sensitivity to insecurity, exclusion, and belonging—qualities that enable them to connect with citizens who feel marginalized by existing institutions (Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2012). In this sense, the orphan's biography becomes politically meaningful because it mirrors the democratic promise itself: the possibility of transcending circumstances and constructing a new identity through perseverance and achievement.

The significance of the Orphan Paradox becomes even more striking when viewed in comparative terms. In India, as in the United States, democratic politics has oscillated between dynastic inheritance and outsider insurgency. The Nehru–Gandhi family represents one of the most enduring political dynasties in the democratic world, deriving legitimacy from lineage, sacrifice, and symbolic association with the nation's founding (Brown, 2003; Palshikar, 2014). Yet Indian democracy has repeatedly generated leaders whose authority emerged from hardship rather than

inheritance. Figures such as Lal Bahadur Shastri, who lost his father in childhood, Manmohan Singh, who lost his mother in infancy, and Narendra Modi, whose political identity was built upon narratives of humble origins and outsider status, illustrate the continuing appeal of self-made leadership in a society often structured by hierarchy and inherited privilege (Guha, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2021). As in the United States, voters frequently oscillate between the reassurance of familiar family names and the promise of leaders who claim to have overcome adversity through personal effort.

Viewed from this perspective, the central question is not whether democracies produce dynasties or outsiders, but why they repeatedly require both and what drives the oscillation between the two. The heir and the orphan represent complementary responses to enduring human needs: security and change, continuity and renewal, order and aspiration. American and Indian political development have each been shaped by the dynamic interaction of these forces. The self-made leader rises against inherited privilege, only to establish a new political legacy that future generations may inherit. In turn, dynastic power generates demands for fresh outsiders who promise reform. This cycle has repeated itself from Lincoln to Obama and from Shastri to Modi, just as it has from the Adamses and Kennedys to the Nehru–Gandhis. The persistence of these patterns across two of the world's largest democracies suggests that they are not historical accidents but recurring features of democratic life itself (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2017; Dal Bó et al., 2009).

Ultimately, the Orphan Paradox invites a reconsideration of leadership itself. Rather than viewing personal adversity as incidental to political development, it suggests that experiences of loss, displacement, and rupture may be among the most consequential formative influences in democratic life. The orphan is not merely a recurring figure in American mythology or Indian political culture; it is a recurring figure in democratic history. If dynasties reveal how power is inherited, orphan leaders reveal how power is recreated. Together they illuminate a fundamental truth about democracy: societies continually seek leaders who can embody both continuity and transformation. The enduring contest between the heir and the orphan reflects a deeper struggle within democratic culture itself—the tension between the security of inherited authority and the hope that individuals can transcend circumstance and remake both themselves and the nations they lead. The history of India and the United States suggests that democratic renewal often emerges not from privilege alone, but from the capacity of individuals to transform personal loss into public purpose.

References

Applebaum, Anne. (2024). *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*. Doubleday.

Bayat, Asef. (2010). *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East.* Stanford University Press.

Besley, T. & Reynal-Querol, M. (2011). *Do Democracies Select More Educated Leaders?* American Political Science Review, 105(3), 552–566.

Branch, Taylor. (2013). *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement.* Simon & Schuster.

Chandra, Kanchan. (2016). *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary India.* Cambridge University Press.

Chandhoke, Neera. (2019). *Rethinking Pluralism, Secularism and Tolerance: Anxieties of Coexistence.* Sage.

Chhibber, Pradeep & Verma, Rahul. (2018). *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India.* Oxford University Press.

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. 558 U.S. 310 (2010). https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/558/310/

Corbridge, Stuart & Harriss, John. (2000). *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy*. Polity Press.

Dahl, Robert. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition.* Yale University Press.

Della Porta, Donatella. (2013). *Can Democracy Be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements.* Polity.

de la Torre, Carlos. (2017). "Populism in Latin America." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. Oxford University Press.

Donald, David Herbert. (1995). *Lincoln.* Simon & Schuster.

Drezner, Daniel W. (2017). *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats Are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas.* Oxford University Press.

Eatwell, Roger and Goodwin, Matthew. (2018). *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy.* Pelican.

Egidi, Massimo. (2023). "The internal fragility of representative democracy: was Schumpeter right?" *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* (33), ppg. 645-670.

Erikson, Erik H. (1969). *Identity: Youth and Crisis.* W. W. Norton.

Ferguson, Thomas. (1995). *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition.* University of Chicago Press.

Gadbois, George. (2011). *Judges of the Supreme Court of India: 1950–1989.* Oxford University Press.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1927). *The Story of My Experiments with Truth.* Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, Rajmohan. (1992). *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi.* Viking.

Garrow, David. (2017). *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama.* HarperCollins.

Gerbaudo, Paolo. (2017). *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest.* Oxford University Press.

Gilens, Martin and Page, Benjamin. (2014). "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (3): 564–581.

Goddard, Stacie E. and Newman, Abraham. (2025). "Further Back to the Future: Neo-Royalism, the Trump Administration, and the Emerging International System." *International Organization* 79 (Supplement): 12-25.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. (2005). *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln.* Simon & Schuster.

Greenstein, Fred. (2009). *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama.* Princeton University Press.

Guha, Ramachandra. (2018). *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914–1948.* Penguin.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy.* MIT Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2003). *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India.* Columbia University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2016). *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy.* Princeton University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2021). *Modi's India: A Centralising and Authoritarian Regime.* Hurst.

Jayal, Niraja Gopal. (2019). *Democracy and the State: Welfare, Secularism and Development in Contemporary India.* Oxford University Press.

Khan, Mushtaq H. (2012). "Political Settlements and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions." SOAS Working Paper.

Khilnani, Sunil. (2016). *Incarnations: A History of India in Fifty Lives.* Penguin.

Levitsky, Steven and Way, Lucan. (2020). "The New Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 31(1): 51–65.

Levitsky, Steven and Ziblatt, Daniel. (2018). *How Democracies Die.* Crown.

Lukes, Steven. (2005). *Power: A Radical View.* 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Maraniss, David. (1995). *First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton.* Simon & Schuster.

McAdam, Doug. (1999). *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970.* University of Chicago Press.

McAdam, Doug and Kloos, Karina. (2014). *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America.* Oxford University Press.

McPherson, James M. (2008). *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief.* Penguin.

Metcalf, Barbara D. (2022). *A Concise History of Modern India.* Cambridge University Press.

Milner, Helen. (2020). *When States Clash: Globalization and the Politics of Domestic and International Conflict.* Princeton University Press.

Milanovic, Branko. (2016). *Global Inequality.* Harvard University Press.

Morris, Aldon. (1984). *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement.* Free Press.

Mudde, Cas. (2004). "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 541–563.

Mudde, Cas and Rovira-Kaltwasser, Cristóbal. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press.

Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nanda, B. R. (2002). *Gandhi: A Pictorial Biography.* Rupa Publications.

Nord, Marina; Altman, David; Fernandes, Tiago; God, Ana Good and Lindberg, Staffan I. (2026). *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era?* University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

Norris, Pippa and Inglehart, Ronald. (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism.* Cambridge University Press.

Page, Benjamin I.; Bartels, Larry and Seawright, Jason. (2013). "Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans." *Perspectives on Politics* 11(1): 51–73.

Piketty, Thomas. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century.* Harvard University Press.

Piven, Frances Fox and Cloward, Richard. (1977). *Poor People's Movements.* Vintage.

Przeworski, Adam. (2019). *Crises of Democracy.* Cambridge University Press.

Public Citizen. (2020). *Citizens United explained*. https://www.citizen.org/article/citizens-united-explained/

Putnam, Robert D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.* Princeton University Press.

Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* Simon & Schuster.

Remnick, David. (2010). *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama.* Alfred A. Knopf.

Rudolph, Lloyd and Rudolph, Susanne. (1987). *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State.* University of Chicago Press.

Ruparelia, Sanjay. (2015). *Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India.* Hurst.

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. (1986). *The Cycles of American History.* Houghton Mifflin.

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. (1992). *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society.* W. W. Norton.

Schudson, Michael. (2008). *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press.* Polity.

Sen, Amartya. (2009). *The Idea of Justice.* Belknap Press.

Sharma, D. (2026). *The Orphan Paradox: Destinies, Autocracies and Democracies in India and the United States.* Bloomsbury.

Sharma, D. (2025). "The Rise of Populist Authoritarianism in India and the US: Do Family Dynasties and Big Businesses Really Control Democracy?" *Virtual Workshop Series — Session 1: The Rise of Populist Authoritarianism around the World*, https://www.populismstudies.org/virtual-workshop-series-session-1-the-rise-of-populist-authoritarianism-around-the-world/

Sharma, D. (2012). *Barack Obama in Hawaii and Indonesia.* Bloomsbury

Sharma, D. (2016). *The Global Hillary*. Routledge.

Sinha, S. (2011). "Gandhi after Gandhi: The Relevance of the Mahatma's Social Thought." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16 (3): 277–297.

Skocpol, Theda. (2003). *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life.* University of Oklahoma Press.

Skowronek, Stephen. (1997). *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton.* Harvard University Press.

Schumpeter, Joseph. (1942). *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy.* Harper.

Sen, Amartya. (2009). *The Idea of Justice.* Harvard University Press.

Tilly, Charles. (2004). *Social Movements, 1768–2004.* Paradigm.

Tiwari, Meenakshi. (2014). "Civil Society and Anti-Corruption Movements in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 49 (22).

Troy, G. (2013). *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. Princeton University Press.

Trump, M. L. (2020). *Too much and never enough: How my family created the world's most dangerous man*. Simon & Schuster.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). "Engineering the public: Big data, surveillance and computational politics." *First Monday, 22*(8). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i8.4901

Vaishnav, Milan. (2017). *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics.* Yale University Press.

Varshney, Ashutosh. (2002). *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India.* Yale University Press.

White, Ronald C. (2009). *A. Lincoln: A Biography.* Random House.

Yilmaz, Ihsan and Bashirov, Galib. (2018). "The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoğanism in Turkey." *Third World Quarterly* 39 (9): 1812–1830.

Zaller, John. (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.* Cambridge University Press.

Ziblatt, Daniel and Levitsky, Steven. (2018). *How Democracies Die.* Crown.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.