# Trump 2.0: Populism's Ultimate Test in American Governance

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*The below op-ed was [originally published in Valor](#) in Portuguese. Below is the translated version of the op-ed.*

As Donald Trump prepares to assume office for a second term, his administration could represent a profound shift in American governance. He undoubtedly enters office with fewer constraints than his first mandate. He will assume office with a group of advisors more loyal to him, with greater control of the Republican party, a congressional majority, and a more favorable Supreme Court.

But Trump 2.0 may be defined more by being the most "popular" government in modern U.S. history—not due to high approval ratings or a sweeping electoral mandate, but because his proposals align with unfiltered public opinion. This immediate connection to the electorate, largely unmediated by experts, institutions, or long-standing norms, could become both its greatest strength and its most significant weakness.

In 1832, Andrew Jackson defiantly declared, 'The people are the government.' Nearly two centuries later, Donald Trump may finally put that idea to the test in the digital age.

**The Appeal of Raw Public Opinion**
Americans are increasingly frustrated with traditional governance. According to a 2024 Ipsos poll, strong majority of Americans believe the system is broken, that elites do not care for the average guy, reflecting dissatisfaction that transcends party lines. This sentiment has also been consistent over time. This pervasive disillusionment fuels a growing demand for leaders who promise to bypass entrenched systems and deliver change directly to the people.

Never has technology allowed such an unfettered connection between those who govern and those who are governed. The democratization of media—through social platforms, podcasts, livestreams, and independent news outlets—has eroded the traditional role of large institutions as arbiters of voice. The rise of "bro-casters" like Joe Rogan and decentralized platforms like X (formerly Twitter), now owned by Elon Musk, have fundamentally reshaped public discourse.

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Trump himself is a master of this unmediated communication style. Throughout his political career, he has used social media to bypass traditional media filters and speak directly to his base. Reports suggest that Trump monitors real-time feedback through platforms like X and Truth Social, using public sentiment as a compass for decision-making. This approach allows Trump to stay attuned to public sentiment in real time, making his second term a potential model of governance closely aligned with the electorate's immediate concerns.

Such a style of governance was present in his first mandate. Trump then didn't run a traditional campaign when elected president in 2016 and governed actively using social media and Twitter. But in comparison to his first term, where many advisors often tried to act as "guard rails" and manage his style of governance, this time, he will have a cabinet much more loyal to him and less willing to try and tame his instincts. At the same time, Trump returns vindicated over his style of governance and has a hardened view of the need to fight the progressive establishment.

**When Popular Policies Backfire**
History offers clear warnings about the dangers of governing too closely by public opinion. Populist governments, which thrive on responding directly to the will of the people, often succeed in the short term but falter when their policies fail to address complex realities.

Public opinion, while powerful, is not always wise. Think of public opinion as a patient, not a doctor. It can say what hurts—a stagnant economy, rising costs, or unchecked immigration—but it doesn't always know why or what should be done. Governing directly by public opinion often risks treating symptoms rather than addressing root causes.

Herbert Hoover's presidency during the Great Depression provides a cautionary tale. His Smoot-Hawley Tariff, initially popular for protecting American jobs, ended up strangling international trade and worsening the economic downturn. In polling during the mid-2000s, with the rise of populist regimes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil, voters strongly supported heterodox policies—such as tariffs, subsidies, and nationalization—so long as these policies didn't undermine job growth. However, economic disruptions invariably gave people pause. Ipsos polling has found similar conditionalities when it comes to Trump's policies. Take mass deportation. In a recent Ipsos poll, 52% of Americans favor it; this falls to 38% if it affects the economy.

**Trump's Governing Gamble**
It's important to note that some of Trump's policies might not be ends in themselves but rather tools of negotiation. Tariffs, for instance, may serve as leverage to pressure

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foreign governments into trade concessions. Similarly, the threat of mass deportations might aim to discourage migration rather than signify a commitment to removing millions of people.

But if he delivers only a part of his promises on trade protectionism and mass deportation, the result is likely to be higher prices for consumers—which is precisely the more important reason that led to his election in 2024. Trump's policies align more with public opinion. Still, the most important issue that drove independent voters in key swing states to vote for the Republican candidate was directly associated with a higher cost of living. If the sum of deportation (or even the stop of immigration) leads to higher prices for consumers, Trump will pay a price for it with a loss of public support. The most important challenge of the new Trump administration will undoubtedly be to deliver on his campaign promises aligned with voter demands without sowing the seeds of economic disaffection.

**Trump's Populist Trap**

The pattern of populist governance is clear: populist policies work until they don't. Such governments often deliver quick results and win praise for their decisiveness. But they falter when the consequences of their policies become unavoidable.

Trump 2.0 represents a bold experiment in aligning governance with unfiltered public sentiment. Leaders worldwide, from Bolsonaro in Brazil to Modi in India, have adopted similar strategies of direct connection to the public, bypassing traditional mediators. Whether this leads to a renaissance of participatory democracy, or the chaos of short-term populism will not just define Trump's legacy. It may just determine the contours of future governance.

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