



Transatlantic Dialogue 2026

New Perspectives on Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration

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The last decade was marked by a combination of external and internal pressures on democratic states, including a global pandemic, wars, economic challenges, immigration concerns, and changing demographic structures. These forces combined with their politicization have given rise to dangerous self-reinforcing trends with the potential to permanently transform citizen–state relationships within modern democracies. It is crucial that the field of Public Administration seriously engages in the growing consequences of these forces. As an action oriented and applied field of study it is also critical that we direct our scholarship towards developing a more robust science and the corresponding practical and policy interventions to address democratic decline, the vicious circle of populism, and its resulting consequences for the values and systems of public administration.

Among the most noticeable effects of the pressures above, global scholars continue to find that democracy is in decline globally, with 2024 marking the 9th consecutive year that measures of democratic systems have worsened. For example, the 2024 Global State of Democracy report suggests that one in three voters lives in a country where election quality has declined, that in the past four years one in five losing candidates or parties has rejected election outcomes and that even high performing countries have suffered significant decline especially in the Americas and Europe (The Global State of Democracy, 2024). The erosion of democratic institutions and values have thus become common problems in many parts of the world, calling academics and practitioners alike to assess how such backsliding impacts public administration. The situation is however more complex.



Parallel to democratic decline there has been a continued rise in the “vicious circle of populism” (Docquier et al. 2022). marked by distress, increases in populist policies and practices, and in turn intensified instability and further democratic erosion. Among other features, this populism is marked by anti-intellectual tendencies such as, growth in “elite labeling”, and an expansion of “deep state” conspiracy as well as a broader rejection of expertise in favor of “common sense” and growing belief in intellectual egalitarianism. These broader populist trends have been amplified by increased skepticism, change in the landscape of news media, social media, and the rise of AI all of which have blurred lines between facts and opinions. In sum, these lead to a declining trust in institutions, increased grievances, and expanded election of populist leaders (Cremaschi et al. 2025) potentially creating feedback loops that further weaken democratic governance and administrative capacity.

This rise of populism coupled with democratic decline, and a redefined information landscape has fuelled increasingly aggressive ideological and structural attacks on the very idea of a neutral, rational, science driven public service and, in some instances, a marked return to more politically driven forms of government. These dynamics have the potential to reshape public institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. The overarching research question of this Transatlantic Dialogue is thus: How do we understand these dynamics, how are they similar or different across the Atlantic, and most importantly, what has our field to do next?

We invite research that clarifies how public administrations respond to these complex pressures, what happens to legitimacy and trust when services erode, and how democratic governance can be safeguarded while improving public sector performance. We are particularly interested in work that speaks to the sustainability of public services and to practical pathways for revitalizing the social contract, strengthening effectiveness and efficiency without sacrificing equity, accountability, and professionalism.

We welcome papers that explore (but are not limited to):

- Multiple drivers of pressure on public administration: e.g., crises, polarization, populism, or democratic backsliding
- Austerity & public service deprivation: retrenchment, unequal service access, administrative burden, and distributive consequences
- Citizen–state interactions: trust, legitimacy, compliance, participation, lived experiences of public services
- Governance and institutional resilience: safeguarding professionalism, process, accountability, and impartial implementation under stress



- Technology and public administration: (de-)regulated AI, algorithmic decision-making, digital public services, transparency and oversight
- Comparative and transatlantic perspectives: cross-country learning and bridges between public administration and political science literatures
- Reform and renewal: strategies to sustain public services, rebuild legitimacy, and strengthen democratic governance

We welcome theoretical, empirical, and methodological diversity, comparative case studies, survey and experimental research, qualitative research, critical approaches, and mixed-method designs. Papers that connect public administration scholarship with work on democratic governance and institutional change are particularly encouraged.

References

- Cremaschi, Simone, Paula Retzl, Marco Cappelluti, and Catherine E. De Vries. 2025. "Geographies of discontent: Public service deprivation and the rise of the far right in Italy." *American Journal of Political Science* 69: 1581–1599. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12936>
- Docquier, F., Guichard, L., Iandolo, S., Rapoport, H., Turati, R., & Vannoorenberghe, G. (2022). *Democracies in Danger: How Can We Break the Vicious Circle of Populism?* LISER Policy Brief 2022-05.
- The Global State of Democracy 2024 (2024) Global State of Democracy Initiative- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/chapters/global-trends/>