

Populism and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America

by Carlos de la Torre

INTRODUCTION

In Latin America, as in other areas of the world, populists have challenged exclusionary forms of democracy promising to give power to the people. Yet different from other regions, where populists have been marginalized from power until the last two decades, in Latin America populists of different ideological persuasions and who followed distinct economic policies have ruled since the 1930s and 40s. Latin Americanists have debated the relationships between populism, democratization, and authoritarianism since the late 1950s. This article analyzes how scholars interpreted the relationship between populism and democracy to draw lessons to other regions. No longer confined to Latin America or to the margins of European politics, populism spread to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and with Donald Trump, to the cradle of liberal democracy, the United States. Latin America might offer clues to what effects populism would have for democracy worldwide. Are we witnessing processes of democratic erosion, or on the contrary are populists invigorating exclusionary democracies?

The article first analyzes different interpretations of the relationships between populism, democracy, and authoritarianism during classical populism in the 1930s to 1970s, neoliberal populism of the 1990s, and left-wing radical populism of the late 1990s to present. The second section explores the internal contradictions of the logic of populism that combines the democratic precept of using elections as the only legitimate tool to get to power, with autocratic practices to undermine pluralism and to transform a leader into the embodiment of the will of the people. The last section draws lessons from Latin America to global debates on populism and democratization.

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Scholars of Latin America explored the relationships between populism and democratization in different populist waves: classical populism, neoliberal populism, and radical populism.

Classical Populism

Most scholars that analyzed the first wave of populism of the 1930s-1970s, argued that it had ambiguous relationships with democratization. At the same time that populists incorporated excluded sectors to the political community, they attacked the independence of civil society and the media, and concentrated power in the hands of presidents that used laws instrumentally to punish critics and to benefit cronies. Populists like Juan Perón in Argentina, Getulio Vargas in Brazil, and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador expanded social and political rights while restricting civil rights.¹

Populism emerged in oligarchic societies where the franchise was restricted, elites decided on the political destinies of their nations, in contexts of extreme inequalities, and when the poor and the excluded were considered a dangerous and irrational threat to civility, progress, and democracy. Under these systems of economic, political, and cultural exploitation and exclusion, common people were humiliated in daily life. An Argentinean worker interviewed by historian Daniel James remembered the 1930s as a time when, “I always felt like strange when I went to the city, downtown Buenos Aires – like you didn’t belong there, which was stupid but you felt that they were looking down on you, that you weren’t dressed right. The police there treated you like animals too.”²

Populism emerged as a democratizing force that promised free elections to eliminate electoral fraud, the socioeconomic incorporation of workers and the poor, national sovereignty, and the symbolic dignity of the excluded. Populists transformed the stigmas that the elites used to despise the poor into sources of virtue. In the 1930s and 1940s, the elites of Buenos Aires used the term *cabecita negra* to refer to the internal migrants’ “dark skin and black hair.”³ They racialized Perón’s followers as “black Peronists,” or as “greasers,” evoking not only the dirt and oil on workers’ overalls but all that is cheap or in bad taste. Juan and Eva Perón transformed the shirtless masses despised by the elites into the embodiment of the Argentinean nation. Eva Perón, for instance, used “the term *grasita* to affectionately refer to the poor.”⁴

Once in power populists like Perón, Velasco Ibarra or Vargas

simultaneously enacted policies to incorporate the excluded and policies that restricted their fundamental civil rights. Peronism, for example, expanded the franchise and voter turnout during his first government grew from 18 to 50 percent of the population. In 1951, under Perón, women won the right to vote.⁵ “During Perón’s terms in office, the share of the national GDP represented by wages increased from 37 to 47 percent, while real wages increased by 40 percent between 1946 and 1949.”⁶

This inclusionary populist democracy was at odds with notions of accountability, the division of power and bypassed mechanisms of checks and balances.⁷ Populists constructed politics as confrontations against enemies that needed to be destroyed. Perón said that when political adversaries became “enemies of the nation” they were no longer “gentlemen that one should fight fairly but snakes that one can kill in any way.”⁸ The logic of populist confrontation denied democratic spaces for opponents who were constructed as enemies of the poor and the nation. Sectors of the opposition for their part were also anti-pluralist and denied populists of any democratic legitimacy. Historian Luis Alberto Romero wrote, “much of the opposition was concerned to eliminate Perón by whatever means necessary.”⁹ Perón, like other populists, was deposed by a coup d’état in 1955. Velasco Ibarra who was president of Ecuador on five occasions was allowed to finish only one term in office.

Neoliberal Populism

The military dictatorships of the Southern Cone dismantled the social and economic foundations of populism – import substitution industrialization, the industrial bourgeoisie, and working-class organizations. Yet they were unable to end with populism. With the return of democracy, a new generation of politicians such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Fernando Collor de Melo in Brazil, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador adopted the strategies, symbols, and discourses of their populist predecessors while implementing neoliberal economic policies that reduced the role of the state in the economy in favor of the free market.

Without characterizing these regimes as a variant of populism, Guillermo O’Donnell coined the term “delegative democracy” to refer to their particular blend of authoritarian and democratizing traits.¹⁰ In O’Donnell’s view, delegative democracies do not respect civil rights and democratic procedures. They are based on the idea that whoever wins an election has a popular mandate to govern according to his or her interpretation of the people’s will and interests, constrained not by institutions but by raw

power relations. The president's policies are unconnected to promises made during the campaign or to the agreements made with organizations and associations who supported his or her election. According to O'Donnell, "the president is taken to be the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests."¹¹ To "save the country" in the context of economic crises that constrain the institutionalization of democracy, he or she looks for neoliberal technocrats who can design and implement the required economic therapy. Because the government needs to rescue the nation from crisis, its actions do not always respect democratic institutions and procedures or compromises with the opposition.

Radical Populism

When Hugo Chávez started a new wave of leftwing populism that also brought Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa to power, scholars split into those who interpreted these regimes as democratizing ruptures of exclusionary systems, and those who analyzed how these regimes displaced towards competitive authoritarianism. Ernesto Laclau wrote the most articulated defense of populism. He developed a formal theory of populism and its logic of articulation. Populism is a political practice that creates popular political identities. He contrasts the logics of difference and the logics of equivalence. The first presupposes that "any legitimate demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way."¹² Unlike differences that could be resolved with an administrative logic on an individual basis, there are demands that could not be resolved individually and aggregate themselves forming an equivalential chain. Under the logic of equivalence "all the demands in spite of their differential character, tend to aggregate themselves" becoming "fighting demands" that cannot be resolved by the institutional system.¹³ The social space splits into two camps: Power and the underdog.¹⁴ The logic of populist articulation is anti-institutional; it is based on the construction of an enemy, and in an equivalential logic that leads to the rupture of the system because individual demands cannot be processed.

Recent examples of populist ruptures in Latin America are Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales's Bolivia, and Ecuador under Rafael Correa. These nations underwent major crises of political representation. Political parties were perceived as instruments of local and foreign elites that implemented neoliberal policies and thereby increased social inequality. Traditional political parties collapsed as political outsiders rose to power on platforms that promised to eliminate corrupt politicians, use constitution making to revamp all existing institutions, experiment with participatory

forms of democracy, abandoned neoliberal orthodoxy, and implement policies to redistribute income.

A second factor that led to populist ruptures was previous widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. Examples of these popular insurrections against neoliberalism were the Venezuelan Caracazo – a massive insurrection against a hike in the price of gasoline that was brutally repressed where at least 400 people died in February of 1989–.¹⁵ Massive movements of resistance against the three presidents of Ecuador that attempted to implement neoliberal structural reforms and were prevented from finishing their terms in office between 1997 and 2005.¹⁶ The cycle of protest and political turmoil in Bolivia that resulted in the collapse of both the party system that was established in 1985 and the neoliberal economic model.¹⁷

A third factor that led to populist ruptures and to the rise of left-wing populism was the perception that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the US government, and supranational institutions like the International Monetary Fund. These left-wing leaders proposed a counterproject to US dominated neoliberal trade initiatives. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) aimed for a real Latin American and Caribbean integration based on social justice and solidarity among the peoples. Their goals were to stop US domination in the region by promoting Latin America unity and to create a multi-polar international system.

In a break with the neoliberalism that is based on the privatization of social services, the reduction of the size of the state, and decentralization, they enacted policies that strengthened the state and its role in the economy as the main engine of growth. They used the state to reduce inequalities, redistribute wealth, and to increase the consumption of the poor in the market. Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador were rich in hydrocarbons and reaped huge benefits from the commodity boom of the 2000s that sent oil and natural gas prices to record levels. As a result of enhanced revenues, public investment and social spending skyrocketed and poverty rates and, to a lesser extent, inequality, fell when the prices of commodities were high. World Bank figures indicated that the poverty rate fell from 55.4 percent of the population in 2002 to 28.5 percent in 2009 in Venezuela. Poverty in Ecuador was reduced from 37 percent in 2006 to 29 percent in 2011. In Bolivia, it dropped from 60 percent in 2006 to 50.6 percent in 2009, with an even greater decrease in levels of extreme poverty.¹⁸

Scholars that focused on democratic institutions and the relationship between the state and civil society draw different interpretations of the

effects of populism on democracy during the last wave of leftwing populism. Political scientists argued that in poorly institutionalized political systems, populists displaced democracy towards competitive authoritarianism.¹⁹ Steven Levitsky and James Loxton argued that populism pushed weak democracies into competitive authoritarianism for three reasons: 1) populists were outsiders with no experience in the give and take of parliamentary politics; 2) they were elected with the mandate to refound existing political institutions, meaning the institutional framework of liberal democracy; and 3) confronted congress, the judiciary, and other institutions controlled by parties. In order to win elections populists skewed the electoral playing field. As incumbents, they had extraordinary advantages such as using the state media, selectively silencing the privately-owned media, harassing the opposition, controlling electoral tribunal boards and all instances of appeal, and using public funds to influence the election. When these presidents won elections, the voting moments were clean, but the electoral processes blatantly favored incumbents.²⁰

Once in power presidents Chávez, Maduro, and Correa turned to discriminatory legalism, understood as the use of formal legal authority in discretionary ways.²¹ In order to use laws discretionarily, populist presidents packed the courts and institutions of accountability with loyal followers. Chávez for example incrementally gained nearly absolute command of all institutions of the state. He had a supermajority in the legislature, and in 2004 put the highest judicial authority, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, in the hands of loyal judges. Hundreds of lower court judges were fired and replaced by unconditional supporters.²² The National Electoral Council was politicized. Even though it made sure that the moment of voting was clean and free from fraud, it did not enforce rules during the electoral process, routinely favoring Chávez and his candidates. Similarly, Correa put loyal followers in charge of the electoral power, the judicial system, the electoral board, and all the institutions of accountability such as the Ombudsman and the Comptroller.²³ As in Venezuela elections were free from fraud but took place in tilted electoral fields that favored Correa and his candidates.

Control and regulation of the media by the state was at the center of the populists' struggle for hegemony. Chávez led the path in enacting laws to control the privately-owned media. In 2000 the Organic Law of Telecommunication allowed the government to suspend or revoke broadcasting concessions to private outlets when it was "convenient for the interest of the nation." The Law of Social responsibility of 2004 banned "the broadcasting of material that could promote hatred and violence."²⁴ These laws were ambiguous at best, and the government could interpret their

content according to its interests. Correa's government emulated Chávez. In 2013 the National Assembly, as congress is named in Ecuador, controlled by Correa's party approved a communication law that created a board tasked with monitoring and regulating the content of what the media could publish.

To challenge the power of the private media, Chávez's took away radio and television frequencies from critics. The state became the main communicator, controlling 64 percent of television channels.²⁵ Correa followed Chávez in using discriminatory legalism to take away radio and television frequencies. He created a state media conglomerate that included the two most watched TV stations, as well as a several radio stations and newspapers.²⁶ Without a tradition of a public media, and in the hands of governments that did not differentiate their interests from those of the state, these outlets were put to the service of populist administrations.

Chávez and Correa enacted legislation that used ambiguous language to control, and regulate the work of NGOs. In 2010 the Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination in Venezuela barred NGOs that defended political rights or monitored the performances of public bodies from receiving international assistance.²⁷ Three years later in 2013 Correa enacted Executive Decree 16. This decree gave the government authority to sanction NGOs for deviating from the objectives for which they were constituted, for engaging in politics, and for interfering in public policies in a way that contravenes internal and external security or disturbs public peace.²⁸

In Venezuela and Ecuador, social movements were created from the top down to counteract the power of worker's unions, unionized teachers, students, and indigenous groups. Protest was criminalized in Venezuela and Ecuador. Union leaders and striking workers, even when they were sympathizers of Chávez, were charged with terrorism.²⁹ Hundreds of peasant and indigenous activists were accused of terrorism and sabotage in Ecuador. Laws were used discretionally to arrest and harass leading figures of the opposition in the Bolivarian nations. The most notorious cases occurred under Nicolás Maduro. Opposition leader Leopoldo López is facing time in jail on trump charges for inciting violence.

After reviewing the scholarship on the relationship between populism and democracy, we can conclude that it is important to differentiate populism as movements seeking power from populists in power. When out of power populists showed its inclusionary and potentially democratizing face. They demanded the inclusion of the excluded, politicized inequality, and gave symbolic dignity to those who are constantly humiliated by elites. Once in power, populists expanded political and socioeconomic rights, while

restricting civil rights and colonizing the public sphere and civil society. At the same time that they incorporated the excluded, they undermined the institutions and rights that would have allowed citizens to struggle for better forms of democracy. They restricted rights to freedom of association, and limited the rights to freedom of speech and communication. The logic of populism, as will be analyzed below, undermined pluralist debates, and reduced the complexity of democracy to a struggle between two antagonistic camps.

THE LOGIC OF POPULISM

Populists politicized the indignities that the poor and nonwhite had to endure in daily life. It transformed the humiliations that those stigmatized as the rabble, and the uncultured have to endure daily into sources of dignity and even redemption. Paraphrasing Rancière “it consists in making what was unseen visible, in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech.”³⁰ Those who are excluded and stigmatized with administrative categories such as “the poor,” “the informal,” and “the marginal” became “the people” conceived as the incarnation of all virtue. And those who constantly humiliate them become the hideous oligarchy.

Populist rhetoric assembles all social, economic, cultural, and ethnic differentiation and oppression into two irreconcilable poles: the people versus the oligarchy. The notion of “the people” incorporates the idea of antagonistic conflict between two groups, with a romantic view of the purity of the people. As a result, “the people” of populism has been imagined as an undifferentiated, unified, fixed, and homogenous entity.³¹

The populist leader is constructed as the personification of the people. Chávez, for example, professed to be the embodiment of the Venezuelan people. He is quoted boasting, “This is not about Hugo Chávez; this is about a ‘people.’ I represent, plainly, the voice and the heart of millions.”³² On another occasion, Chávez commanded, “I demand absolute loyalty to me. I am not an individual, I am the people.”³³ Because populists use a moral and Manichean discourse “the people” does not face political adversaries but enemies. Hugo Chávez, for example, “constantly separates the ‘people,’ the ‘true’ patriots, from the ‘oligarchy,’ those self-serving elites who work against the homeland. During the general strike called by the opposition, Chavez declared, “this is not about the pro-Chavez against the anti-Chavez . . . but . . . the patriots against the enemies of the homeland.”³⁴ Different from adversaries who fight according to a shared set of rules, and whose positions could be accepted, enemies represent a threat that must be eradicated.

Once in power populists fulfilled their promises to include the poor politically, economically, and culturally. Yet these processes of inclusion led to autocratic regimes because the logic of populist confrontation transformed democratic rivals into enemies. Populists polarized politics as existential struggles between the people and the nation embodied in their leadership, against anti-national and anti-popular oligarchic enemies. They closed institutional spaces for the opposition. Without institutional channels to process conflicts, in conditions of profound polarization, and when elites and even the middle class felt that their class and status privileges were under attack, radical sectors of the opposition invited the military to resolve civilian problems.

Populists constructed political rivals as enemies but did not actualize their physical elimination, and did not use mass terror and disappearances to create a homogenous and uncorrupted national community. The foundational moment of populism rests in winning open and free elections considered as the only expression of the popular will. Classical populists like Juan Perón and Velasco Ibarra fought against electoral fraud, expanded the franchise, and incorporated the excluded to the political community. Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa used ballots to displace political elites. Venezuelans voted in 16 elections between 1999 and 2012, Bolivians in 9 between 2005 and 2016, and Ecuadorians in 6 between 2006 and 2014. Constantly traveling the election trail these presidents ruled as if they were in permanent political campaigns. They used populist discourse and strategies to manufacture rivals into enemies of the people and the homeland while transforming elections into plebiscites on their personas – the embodiment of the revolutionary future, pitted against the defenders of the old regime.

Even though their legitimacy was grounded in winning elections, populists had hard times accepting that they could lose popular elections. If the people are always imagined to be right, and thus having one unified voice and will, it is “morally impossible” that they could vote for those constructed as the enemies of the people.³⁵ In order to win elections Chávez and Correa, for example, skewed the electoral playing field. As incumbents, they had extraordinary advantages such as using the state media, selectively silencing the privately-owned media, harassing the opposition, controlling electoral boards and all instances of appeal, and using public funds to influence the election. When these presidents won elections, the voting moments were relatively clean, but the electoral processes blatantly favored incumbents.

John Keane writes that “enforcing the distinction between holding and leaving office is a key indicator of whether or not a form of government could be considered democratic.”³⁶ Populist leaders like Perón or Chávez did

not see themselves as ordinary presidents elected for limited terms in office. On the contrary, they perceived themselves as leading the refoundation of their republics. Perón boasted of securing sixty years of Peronist power,³⁷ and only cancer prevented Chávez from becoming Venezuela's permanently elected president for life. Populists see the presidency as a possession that should remain in their hands until fulfilling the liberation of their people. Yet populists claim legitimacy through winning elections that they could conceivably lose and thus be bound by electoral results.³⁸ Populism hence grounds its legitimacy in the democratic precept of winning elections, and in the autocratic view of power as a possession of the leader. The contradiction between governing as if they were the embodiment of the people, and asking the people to approve of their presidencies in open elections that they could lose explain their ambiguities toward democratic institutions and practices. They honored elections free of fraud, but could not accept pluralism and assumed that since they are the embodiment of the people, the people would only vote for them. Populists closed spaces to rivals that were manufactured as conspiratorial and antinational enemies that were attempting to regain power to reinstate the old regime. Populism thus simultaneously accepts democracy and subverts it to remain in power until liberating the people.

WHAT CAN OTHER WORLD REGIONS LEARN FROM LATIN AMERICAN POPULISM?

Populism is not a pathology, it is part of democracy.³⁹ Populists politicize exclusions, point to the malfunctions of democracies, and demand for better forms of democratic representation and participation. The populist critique of existing democracies cannot be ignored or dismissed. It is pointless to defend existing democracies without taking into consideration the populist critique.

Populism will be more inclusionary when it emerges in exclusionary political systems. Thaksin Shinawatra included the rural poor, Bangkok taxi drivers, and the urban informal sector. His economic policies "were successful in opening up material inclusion – both in terms of resources and finances – to previously excluded groups in society... particularly those of often ignored rural areas."⁴⁰ Similarly, Michael Sata in Zambia aimed to rectify the economic marginalization of the majorities who made a living in the informal sector of the economy while also appealing to previously marginalized ethnolinguistic groups like the Bembas.⁴¹ These varieties of inclusionary populism had ambiguous effects on democracy. Sata used elections as plebiscites on his rule, and was antipluralist even jailing Hakainde

Hichilema, the leader of an opposition party on the dubious grounds that he defamed the president.⁴² Thaksin attacked the independent media, bullied nongovernmental organizations, and his politics of polarization and closure of democratic spaces for the opposition led to coups against him in 2006 and his sister Yingluck in 2014.

Neoliberal and radical populism in Latin America were revolts against political elites. Traditional parties were portrayed as “a closed, self-interested, and self-reproducing governing caste insulated from popular needs and concerns.”⁴³ Fujimori and radical populists attacked and displaced parties and created new political systems and institutions. Fujimori abolished democracy with a coup that closed congress and allowed him to reorganize the judiciary. Chávez, Morales, and Correa used democratic practices like elections and the courts to concentrate power in the executive, to control civil society and the public sphere. Their systematic attacks on rights and civil liberties, the curtailment of institutions of accountability, and the tilting of the electoral playing field to favor incumbents led to the displacement of democracy towards authoritarianism.⁴⁴

Populists in Europe, the U.S. and Australia attacked political elites and parties. Rightwing variants of populism in Europe and the United States politicize fears of immigration, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. Leftwing parties like Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain politicized the exclusions of neoliberalism but are not xenophobic. Whereas leftwing variants promise better forms of democracy, rightwing variants use nativism and xenophobia to appeal to a common past from which immigrants and nonwhites do not belong.

Populists were elected in coalition governments in Italy, and Viktor Orbán has ruled Hungary since 2010. Like other populists, Orbán confronted NGOs, the privately-owned media, packed the state with cronies, and displaced democracy to “the grey zone between liberal democracy and fully blown authoritarianism.”⁴⁵ It could be expected that stronger and more consolidated institutions and civil societies could shield nations like the United States from populist attacks to the institutional framework of democracy. Yet, even if Donald Trump does not displace democracy towards authoritarianism, he has already damaged the inclusive democratic public sphere. Hate speech and the denigration of minorities are replacing the politics of cultural recognition and tolerance built by the struggles of feminists and anti-racists social movements since the 1960s.⁴⁶

Laclau and his followers argue that given the inevitability of populist revolts to the marginalization of citizens from politics, the task of the left is to construct popular democratic subjects. Otherwise rightwing populist

would give expression to popular grievances,⁴⁷ and working-class politics would be expressed through nationalist and xenophobic languages.⁴⁸ They sustain that with the global rise of neoliberalism understood as a rational and scientific mode of governance, public debate on the political economy was closed and replaced by the imposition of the criteria of experts. When all parties accepted neoliberalism and the rule of technocrats, citizens could not choose between alternatives. Politics was reduced to an administrative enterprise.⁴⁹ Democracy became depoliticized and citizens were transformed into consumers. Choosing between parties, as Chantal Mouffe sarcastically said, became like selecting Coke over Pepsi.⁵⁰

Populism, they argue, entails the renaissance of politics. It is a revolt against technocratic reasoning, the surrendering of national sovereignty to supranational institutions, and of the popular will to neoliberal political elites. Instead of allowing the right to politicize fears to migration and multiculturalism, they argue for the necessity of leftist variants of populism. Latin America's experience with populist in power should give words of caution to praises of leftwing populism. Whereas Laclau was right in arguing that populism politicized neoliberal administrative orders, populist Schmittan views of the political are dangerous because they are anti-pluralist, and in the end antidemocratic. Populism attacks the institutions that are "an indispensable bulwark against political despotism."⁵¹ Constitutionalism, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, assembly, and the press are necessary to the politics of participatory democracy, to strengthen the public sphere, and to allow independent social movements to push for their democratizing demands. Populists in power, even those that promised more democracy and the end of neoliberalism, targeted precisely the constitutional

NOTES

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