POPULISM 1 (2018) 1–21

brill.com/popu

Populism in Power: Between Inclusion and Autocracy

Carlos de la Torre
University of Kentucky
c.delatorre@uky.edu

Enrique Peruzzotti
Universidad Torcuato Di Tella
peruzzot@utdt.edu

Abstract

The Latin American historical experience with populist regimes as well as the theoretical reflections produced by Latin Americanists are particularly relevant not just for determining the nature of a very contested political concept but also for understanding the logic of populism in government and the threats it poses to liberal democratic regimes. Populism in government or the attempt at stabilizing a populist regime is no novelty for Latin America, a continent where populism has been a constant presence in politics since the 1930s. Along with their inclusionary impulse, those experiences left a long-lasting troublesome institutional and cultural legacy of political polarization, weak institutions, and recurrent authoritarianism. Populism made a comeback in several countries during the novel democratic period, largely due to the severe crisis that many of the democratic regimes encountered. Inspired by radical democratic ideals, contemporary populism actively engaged in a politics of regime transformation.

Keywords

populism – Latin American populism – inclusive populism – populist regime types – populism and power – populism and authoritarianism

The global ascendancy that populism enjoys nowadays has resulted in the proliferation of comparative analyses about the diverse expressions that the

 | DOI 10.1163/25888072-01011002

phenomenon adopts in different national and regional contexts. In particular, the literature has paid attention to those areas that were shocked by the arrival of populist leaders to power: the USA and Europe. As a result, there has been an extensive focus on Western cases to the detriment of other experiences in the global south, which are often reduced to footnotes of more significant developments.[1] This article seeks to remedy such an imbalance in perspective by bringing the Latin American experience to the forefront of contemporary debates, arguing that there is much to learn from the long-term engagement of the region with populism.

Latin America provides an unavoidable reference point for any discussion on the subject for several reasons.[2] First, it is the region that gave birth to modern populism and generated its most paradigmatic expressions: *Peronismo* and *Chavismo*; second, due to the continent's extensive experience not only with *populism in power* but also with *populist regimes*; third, because it is the region that initiated the contemporary populist revival both in politics as well as in political theory; fourth, because it has been the breeding ground of "inclusionary" forms of populism that are frequently presented as the more benign face of a phenomenon that tends to show its ugly side in established Western democracies. All those reasons make the inclusion of the Latin American experience central to any understanding about the nature and challenges that populism poses to present-day democracies.

The Latin American historical experience with populist regimes as well as the theoretical reflections produced by Latin Americanists are particularly relevant not just for determining the nature of a very contested political concept but also for understanding the logic of populism in government and the threats it poses to liberal democratic regimes. Populism in government or the attempt at stabilizing a populist regime is no novelty for Latin America, a continent where populism has been a constant presence in politics since the 1930s. Latin American populist regimes are considered as playing a key role in the fundamental democratization of those societies thanks to their promotion of inclusionary public policies. Along with their inclusionary impulse, those experiences left a long-lasting troublesome institutional and cultural legacy of political polarization, weak institutions, and recurrent authoritarianism that

1 Jan Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

2 Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: The University of California Press, 2017); Carlos de la Torre, *Populismos Una Inmersión Rápida* (Barcelona: Tibidabo Ediciones, 2017); Enrique Peruzzotti, "Populism as Democratization Nemesis: The Politics of Regime Hybridization". *Chinese Political Science Review*, DOI 10.1007/s41111-017-0070-2.

only the third wave of democratization brought to a close. Populism made a comeback in several countries during the novel democratic period, largely due to the severe crisis that many of the democratic regimes encountered. Inspired by radical democratic ideals, contemporary populism actively engaged in a politics of regime transformation.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the first wave of "classical" populism as illustrated by Peron's Argentina and Velasco Ibarra's Ecuador. Their governments engaged in policies that resulted in the successful incorporation of previously marginalized groups. However, these paradigmatic expressions of inclusive populism failed to lay the foundation for the institutionalization of democracy in their respective countries, thus opening a spiral of political polarization and institutional instability that prevented the consolidation of a democratic political order. The second section analyzes the contemporary expressions of populism as illustrated by Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela, Evo Morales's Bolivia, and Rafael Correa's Ecuador. As with previous historical experiences, those administrations simultaneously generated both redistributive and authoritarian outcomes; yet the fact that they took place in an already democratized environment set them apart from the "classical" populist experiences. The third section systematically compares the relationships between populism, inclusion, and authoritarianism. The fourth section draws some lessons that can be learned from the Latin American experience to help us understand the challenges and threats that contemporary expressions of populism pose in other regions.

1 Classical Latin American Populism: Inclusion and Truncated Democratization

Scholars who understand democracy with substantive arguments as the promotion of social justice, redistribution, and equality view populism favorably. For instance, Argentinean sociologist Carlos Vilas considers that many of the classical populist regimes that were present in the region between the 1930s and 1970s led to fundamental democratization of their respective societies.[3] Populism ruptured oligarchic regimes that excluded politically, economically, and ethnically large sectors of the population. Populist regimes put an end to the electoral fraud methods that ensured control of the electoral results by the

3 Carlos Vilas, "Estudio preliminar: El populismo o la democratización fundamental de América Latina." In *La democratización fundamental: El populismo en América Latina* (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes 1995), 11–118.

elites during the oligarchical period while simultaneously promoting the expansion of the franchise, incorporating previously disenfranchised sectors like women or the illiterate.[4] Under Juan Peron in Argentina, the percentage of voters surged from 18% of the population in 1946 to 50% in 1955, and women voted for the first time in the 1952 elections. Brazil under Getulio Vargas also significantly augmented the size of the electorate, which jumped from a mere 10% of the population in 1930 to 35% in 1945, thanks to the passing of legislation that allowed all literate women and men over 18 to vote.

Populist regimes engaged in a massive politics of income redistribution, largely thanks to the introduction of welfare policies that included free public health care and education. In addition, workers received other material benefits such as access to social and medical services, and paid vacations.[5] During Domingo Peron´s initial administrations (1946–1955), the share of wages in the National Gross Domestic Product increased from 37% in 1946 to 47% in 1955, partly thanks to the generalization of a system of collective bargaining that covered more than 80% of unionized workers.

While inclusionary, the first populist wave in Latin America was not institutionally democratic because it transformed political rivals into enemies, closed spaces to the opposition, concentrated power in the executive while disregarding the principles of separation of powers and governmental accountability, and considered the leader as the only truthful and legitimate voice of the people and the nation. Peron considered himself as the one that best expressed the aspirations of the Argentine people. Such forms of political self-understanding denied democratic legitimacy to oppositional voices, be they in the Parliament, the courts, the media, or civil society and made efforts to impose its political will over all institutions of Argentine society. By 1950, all Argentine governmental institutions were controlled by the Presidency. Peron "had already replaced the members of the Supreme Court with staunch defenders of the regime, had gained firm control over Congress, and had tamed the labor movement".[6] As historian Luis Alberto Romero writes, "[A]t

4 Free and open elections became the decisive moment of the populist representative contract: their fight against the fraudulent practices of oligarchic regimes is what contributed to building populism´s democratic credentials despite their illiberal leanings. See Enrique Peruzzotti, "Populism in Democratic Times: Populism, Representative Democracy, and the Debate on Democratic Deepening," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century,* eds. Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson (Baltimore and Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 75.

5 Mariano Plotkin, "Final Reflections." In *The New Cultural History of Peronism*, edited by Matthew Karush and Oscar Chamosa (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 273.

6 Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón. A Cultural History of Peron's Argentina*

every level of government, all power was concentrated in the hands of the executive—whether mayor, governor, or president—making it clear that the movement and the nation were considered one."[7] In the elections of 1951, Peronists won all of the Senate seats, and 90% of the chamber of deputy seats.[8] In 1952, Congress—dominated by Peron's loyal followers—established the Peronist Doctrine as the Argentine national doctrine. The Peronist Manual stated, "The Peronist doctrine, which is the national doctrine, is exclusively Argentine and is based on what we call Peronismo".[9] This doctrine was vaguely defined as endorsing the principles of social justice, economic independence, and national sovereignty. It "removed all possible Argentineness from opposition to Peron [...] they were simple sellouts and traitors to the nation".[10] Peron becomes the epitome of the Homeland.[11]

Peron transformed democratic rivals into enemies, and as "enemies of the nation," they could no longer be considered "gentlemen that one should fight fairly but snakes that one can kill in any way".[12] His administration temporarily closed critical media venues and expropriated the newspapers *La Prensa* and *La Nueva Provincia*.[13] His government created a chain of radio stations and newspapers. The *Subsecretaría de Prensa y Difusión* "published more than 2.5 million pamphlets of various types and more than 3 million posters, in addition to producing movies and other propaganda materials".[14] 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. In Argentina, "much of the opposition was concerned to eliminate Peron by whatever means necessary".[15] Eventually, Peron was ousted in September 1955 by a military government that proscribed Peronismo. The coup d'état inaugurated a long cycle of

(Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 98.

7 Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 110.

8 Romero, *A History of Argentina*, 24.

9 Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 23.

10 Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77.

11 Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins*, 89.

12 Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins*, 86.

13 Romero, *A History of Argentina*, 10.

14 Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 31.

15 Romero, *A Brief History*, 124.

institutional instability, political violence, and military authoritarianism that was to be closed only with the successful transition to democracy in 1983.[16]

Between 1934 and 1972, José María Velasco Ibarra was five times president of Ecuador, yet he could complete only one of those terms in office; for the other ones, he was removed by the military. Velasco Ibarra engaged in reforms to bring an end to the practice of electoral fraud and to expand the franchise, which rose from 3.1% in 1933 to 16.83% of the Ecuadorian population in 1968.[17] The number of artisans', employees', and workers' organizations increased during Velasco's time from 42 in 1930 to 210 in 1942, and 682 in 1950.[18] He embarked on a project of nation-state-building and the construction of infrastructure and schools. His populist language gave symbolic worth to the poor and the excluded as the essence of the nation. However differently from Peron's policies of social and economic inclusion, under Velasco inclusion was more political and symbolic than socioeconomic. Moreover, he did not create a political party or organizations in civil society that could last longer than his life. Velasquismo died when its caudillo passed away in 1979.

Like other populists, Velasco closed spaces to the opposition and disregarded basic democratic procedures. During his tenures, there were three self-coups (in 1935, 1946, and 1971). His administration closed critical newspapers, sent thugs to beat up journalists and to attack newspapers, and incarcerated members of the opposition. Under his administration, two constitutions were drafted in 1945 and 1946, and he did not respect any of these charters. His self-coup of 1946 abolished the 1945 constitution, and his coup of 1971 temporarily abolished the 1946 constitution. Without any institutional mechanism to resist his autocratic policies, his opponents called the military to resolve their problems, and he was ousted four times.[19] His legacy was one of acute political instability, disregard for the basic rules of the democratic game, political polarization between his followers and opponents, and the destruction of political parties. As Velasco said, he was the alternative to the failed projects of the conservative, liberal, and socialist parties. After six years

16 See Enrique Peruzzotti, "From Praetorianism to Democratic Consolidation. Argentina's difficult transition to civilian rule" *Journal of Third World Studies,* Volume XXI, Number 1: Spring 2004.

17 Juan Maiguashca and Liisa North, "Orígenes y significados del velasquismo: lucha de clases y participación política en el Ecuador, 1929–1972, in *La Cuestión Regional y el Poder*, edited by Rafael Quintero, Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional, 1991, 132.

18 Maiguashca and North, "Orígenes", 106.

19 Carlos de la Torre, *De Velasco a Correa: Insurreciones, populismo y elecciones en Ecuador, 1944–2013* (Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar and Corporación Editora Nacional, 2015).

of military rule (1972–1979), a process of democratic transition took place, which resulted in a successful instauration of civilian rule and put an end to the past populism-military dictatorship cycles. Yet Ecuador would soon witness the emergence of a new era of populism that would reach its zenith with the governments of Rafael Correa (2007–2017).

Similarly, the histories of other Latin American nations like Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Panamá oscillated between populist governments and military coups. As Kurt Weyland argues, the polarization and closure of spaces to the opposition under classical populism led to military breakdowns and profound political instability.[20]

2 Radical Populism: Inclusion and Regime Hybridization

Hugo Chávez inaugurated a new populist wave in 1999 to be followed by Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006 till present), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–2017), and Nicolas Maduro (2013 till present).[21] The arrival of populist administrations took place in a context of generalized political and economic crisis that prompted a drastic reorientation of policies away from the then-prevailing neoliberal script. Helped with the extraordinary income generated by the commodities boom, the state was reinstated as the principal engine of growth and redistribution. According to the World Bank, when the prices of oil and minerals were high, the poverty rate in Venezuela fell from 55.4% of the population in 2002 to 28.5% in 2009; in Ecuador from 37% in 2006 to 29% in 2011; while in Bolivia it dropped from 60% in 2006 to 50.6% in 2009.[22]

Populist leaders reached power amidst a profound crisis of political legitimacy of most institutions of representative government: political parties, congress, the courts, and all institutions of accountability were perceived as instruments through which corrupt politicians implemented antinational neoliberal policies. Chávez, Morales, and Correa were determined to leave such a past behind thanks to a fundamental reshuffling of the political and institutional landscape of their countries. To accomplish that, they resorted to four strategies: 1) constitutional assemblies and constitution-

20 Kurt Weyland, "Populist authoritarianism" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos de la Torre (New York: Routledge 2018).

21 The case of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina (2003–2015) that did not lead to a populist rupture will be discussed in the next section.

22 Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson, "Introduction: The Evolution of Latin American Populism and the Debates Over Its Meaning", in Populism of the Twenty First Century edited by Carlos de la Torre, and Cynthia Arnson (Baltimore and Washington: the Johns Hopkins University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 28.

making; 2) overriding the courts and other agencies of governmental accountability; 3) using the state to colonize the public sphere and civil society; 4) permanent elections and campaigns to displace traditional parties and consolidate their legitimacy.

2.1 *Constitutional Assemblies and Constitution-making*

Constitution-making was prominent in all three cases, for it was envisioned as a privilege tool to change the institutional landscape of the nation to make it more inclusive and democratic.[23] Populist leaders and their coalitions, however, diverged in the mechanism used to summon their constituent assemblies. The Bolivian congress followed constitutional procedures and enacted a special law to convene a constitutional assembly in 2006. Chávez and Correa instead used referenda to consult on whether or not to convene a constitutional assembly ignoring constitutional requirements. Their populist reasoning was that even though the existing constitution did not allow for such a mechanism, the people's constituent power had primacy over constituted power.

In Ecuador, a Congress controlled by traditional parties threatened to halt the proposed referendum. Yet after securing key institutional support from the Electoral Tribunal Board (TSE) and the Constitutional Tribunal (TC), Correa managed to push his project through, disqualifying 57 legislators opposed to the unconstitutional mechanism used to call for an assembly.[24]

The Bolivian constituent assembly, where Evo Morales's coalition had a majority, coexisted with opposition political parties that controlled congress. Morales's coalition was forced to negotiate the content of the constitution. By contrast, in Venezuela and Ecuador, charismatic presidents controlled the processes for elaborating new charters in assemblies where they had majorities. After drafting the new constitution, the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian assemblies convened a small congress ("congresillo") tasked to name the new judicial authorities and the people in charge of all the institutions of accountability. Loyal followers of Chávez and Correa were put in charge of the electoral power, the judicial system, and all the institutions of accountability.

23 Angélica Bernal, "The Meanings and Perils of Presidential Refounding in Latin America". *Constellations* 21 (4), 2014, 442–443.

24 Carlos de la Torre and Andrés Ortiz, "Populist polarization and the slow death of democracy in Ecuador", *Democratization*, Vol. 23 nº 2 (2016), 224.

2.2 *Overriding the Courts and Other Agencies of Governmental Accountability*

The Venezuelan, Bolivian, and Ecuadorian constitutions were approved in referenda, establishing an institutional order that concentrates power in the hands of the president, to the detriment of the liberal principles of separation of powers and checks and balances. Populist presidents packed the courts and institutions of accountability with loyal followers. After drafting the new Constitution, the Venezuelan Assembly created a transitory council that governed legislative affairs between the approval of the constitution in December 1999 and the election of the new congress in August 2000. By controlling this council, Chávez put trustworthy authorities in charge of the National Electoral Council. In 2004, Chávez placed the highest judicial authority, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, in the hands of loyal judges. By 2006, hundreds of lower court judges were fired and replaced by unconditional supporters.[25] Correa followed Chávez's model of convening a transitory council after the assembly drafted the new constitution. The "congresillo" was tasked to name the new judicial authorities and the people in charge of the institutions of accountability such as the Ombudsman and the Comptroller. In 2011, Correa created an ad-hoc Consejo de la Judicatura charged with appointing the members of the National Court, the highest judicial authority. For example, Gustavo Jalkh, who was Correa's personal secretary, was named head of the Consejo. Similarly, Morales gained control of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.[26] Between 2006 and 2009, Morales's "administration dismantled the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal, gaining control of the courts after 2010".[27]

Laws were used discretionally to arrest and harass leading figures of the opposition. Morales used the legal system to harass and intimidate former presidents Jorge Quiroga, Carlos Mesa, and Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada and elected leaders of the opposition such as Manfred Reyes Villa, Mario Cossío prefecto of Tarija, Rubén Costas prefecto of Santa Cruz, and Ernesto Suárez prefecto of Beni. The most notorious cases occurred under Nicolas Maduro. Opposition leader Leopoldo López faced time in jail on trumped up charges of inciting violence.

25 Kirk Hawkins, "Responding to Radical Populism: Chavism in Venezuela", *Democratization* July, 2015, 11.

26 Raúl Madrid, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 182.

27 Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez Liñán, "Cross-Currents in Latin America", *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (1), 2015, 117.

2.3 *Colonizing the Public Sphere and Civil Society*

Presidents Chávez, Morales, and Correa turned to discriminatory legalism, understood as the use of formal legal authority in discretionary ways to challenge critical actors within the media and civil society.[28] They all seem to follow a similar script oriented to colonize the public sphere and civil society to avoid being subject to social accountability: control and regulation of the media; creating state-led media emporiums that, in nations without a tradition of a public media, and in the hands of governments that did not differentiate their interests from those of the state, put these outlets to the service of populist administrations; control and regulation of NGOs, creating parallel social movements from the top or favoring loyal movements.

Populists were convinced that the media had a great influence in the population's ideology and collective consciousness.[29] President Correa, for example, asserted that "the media have always been one of the de facto powers that have dominated Latin American countries."[30] He claimed that a few families from the oligarchy controlled the media and that, because they were losing old privileges, they had mounted campaigns to discredit leftist regimes at the national and international level. Journalists, according to Correa's analysis, reproduced what the owners of media outlets dictated.

Populists argued that the private media acted as an opposition political party. Morales, for example, on several occasions said that the media is his "number one enemy."[31] Control and regulation of the media by the state was at the center of the populist 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."[32] These laws were ambiguous, and the government could interpret their content according to its interests. Correa's government emulated Chávez. In 2013, the National Assembly controlled by his party approved a communication law that created a board tasked with monitoring and regulating the content of what the media could publish. According to the administration, such a

28 Kurt Weyland, "The Threat from the Populist Left", *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 24, nº 3, July 2013, 23.

29 Silvio Waisbord, *Vox Populista, Medios, Periodismo, Democracia* (Buenos Aires: Gedisa 2013), 45.

30 Rafael Correa, "Interview. Ecuador's Path", *New Left Review*, 77, 2012, 100.

31 Madrid, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics*, 181.

32 Javier Corrales, "Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela." *Journal of Democracy* 26 (2), 2015, 39.

regulatory mechanism was needed in order to assure that the private media delivered information objectively. Their argument was that, since the privately-owned media, like privately-owned banks, provided a public service, they needed to be regulated by the state. The Superintendence of Communication (SUPERCOM) initiated 269 processes against journalists and private media outlets. Most of these processes resulted in sanctions that included fines, written warnings, public apologies, and rectification of previous statements.[33]

To challenge the power of the private media, Chávez's government used discriminatory legalism and took away radio and television frequencies from critics. The state became the main communicator, controlling 64% of television channels.[34] In Bolivia, media concessions were equally divided between the state, the private sector, and popular and indigenous organizations. 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 several radio stations and newspapers.[35] 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 used and abused mandatory broadcasts that all media venues were forced to air and created their own TV shows, *Aló Presidente*, and *Enlaces Ciudadanos*. Every Sunday, Chávez addressed the nation for four to six hours, and Correa talked every Saturday for two to three hours. They set the informational agenda as they announced major policies in TV shows where they also sang popular tunes, talked about their personal life and dreams, and viciously attacked opponents and journalists. Chávez and Correa became ever-present figures in the daily life of Venezuelans and Ecuadorians, constantly talking on the radio and television while billboards with their images and propaganda for their governments adorned cities and highways.

Presidents Chávez and Correa suffocated the private media by reducing government advertisement to critical media venues and by manipulating the subsidies for the price of paper.[36] They used discriminatory legalism to intimidate and harass journalists and private media owners. Correa sued the owners of newspapers and journalists who uncovered cases of corruption. The most notorious cases that were reported worldwide involved an editor and three

33 Felipe Burbano de Lara, "Apuntes sobre la libertad académica y de expression en el Ecuador, *LASA Forum*, 47 (2), 2016, 27.

34 Javier Corrales, "Autocratic Legalism", 41.

35 de la Torre and Ortiz, "Populist polarization", 231.

36 Waisbord, *Vox Populista*.

board members of the largest privately-owned newspaper, *El Universo*, who were convicted of defamation and sentenced to three-year terms for publishing an editorial entitled "No to Lies"; the paper was also fined US$40 million. Subsequently, president Correa pardoned them.

These presidents enacted legislation that used ambiguous language to control and regulate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In 2010, the Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination in Venezuela barred Non-Governmental Organizations that defended political rights or monitored the performances of public bodies from receiving international assistance.[37] 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. For instance, the environmentalist organization *Pachama Alliance* was closed for deviating from the organization's original goals and for interfering with public policy and security.[38] Morales followed suit by passing legislation in 2013 to revoke an organization's permit to operate if it performs activities different from those listed in its statute or if the organization's representative is criminally sanctioned for carrying out activities that "undermine security or public order."[39]

In Bolivia and Ecuador, state institutions were created to supervise and control the participation of the organized sector of society. The right to participate was restricted to groups that were recognized and authorized by the state.[40] In Venezuela and Ecuador, social movements were created from the top down to counteract the power of workers' unions, unionized teachers, students, and indigenous groups. At the same time, these organizations distributed resources to loyal followers who promoted the interest of their governments.[41]

Protest was criminalized in Venezuela and Ecuador. Union leaders and striking workers, even when they were sympathizers of Chávez, were charged

37 Corrales, "Autocratic Legalism", 39.

38 De la Torre and Ortiz, "Populist polarization", 229–230.

39 Human Rights Watch, World Report 2015 Bolivia, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/bolivia.

40 Moira Zuazo, ¿Los movimientos sociales en el poder? El gobierno del MAS en Bolivia, *Nueva Sociedad* 227 May–June 2010, 134.

41 Luis Gómez Calcaño, *La disolución de las fronteras: sociedad civil, representación y política en Venezuela*, (Caracas: CENDES, 2009); de la Torre and Ortíz "Populist polarization".

with terrorism.[42] Hundreds of peasant and indigenous activists were accused of terrorism and sabotage in Ecuador.[43]

2.4 *Permanent Electioneering and Campaigning*

The fourth strategy was to use ballots convening numerous elections and permanent campaigning to consolidate their power, displace the opposition, and create new hegemonic blocks. Venezuelans voted in 16 elections between 1999 and 2012, Bolivians in nine between 2005 and 2016, and Ecuadorians in 11 between 2006 and 2013. All these elections were plebiscitary referenda on their presidents. As with classical populism, the vote became the main mechanism to legitimize their presidencies. Yet even though the moment of voting was freed from major fraud, the electoral process took place in skewed electoral playing fields that blatantly favored incumbents.[44] Radical populists simultaneously claimed legitimacy in winning clean elections while resorting to all means to restrict the electoral chances of oppositional forces.

Chávez and Correa ruled as if they were in permanent political campaigning mode. They put experts on political communication in charge of their communication policies and dominated the radio and TV waves. They constantly manufactured enemies, such as traditional politicians and journalists. By constantly being on the electoral trail and by visiting all regions of their nations, these populist presidents never lost touch with their base of support and kept on renewing their charisma.

3 Evaluating the Legacy of Classical and Contemporary Expressions of Populism in Latin America

While the forms of self-understanding that inspired the behaviors of populism in power during the first and second Latin American waves do not significantly differ from one another, there is a significant change of the contextual conditions that set those experiences apart from one another. The most distinguishing feature differentiating one period from another is that contemporary expressions of populism take place within already

42 Consuelo Iranzo, "Chávez y la política laboral en Venezuela 1999–2010, *Revista Trabajo*, 5 (8) 2011, 28–31.

43 Carmen Martínez Novo, "Managing Diversity in Postneoliberal Ecuador", *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 19 (1) 2014, 103–125.

44 Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes', *Democratization* 20 (1), 2013: 107–136.

democratized societies. That was not the case with classical populist regimes that aimed at replacing semi-democratic or openly authoritarian regimes and that consequently could be considered a step forward in the process of political modernization. The latter is a crucial difference when evaluating the democratizing or inclusionary outcomes of any populist intervention.[45]

Differently from the classical populist regimes, more contemporary expressions take place in an already democratized continent. The accomplishments of classical regimes were contrasted with that of authoritarianism or façade democratic regimes based on electoral fraud, yet that is not the case with contemporary populism because they are constrained by the existence of a novel democratic consensus. Irrespectively of the fact that the populist revival takes place in conjunctures of deep political or economic crisis, the option for an openly authoritarian behavior on behalf of populist leaders or of oppositional forces is out of the question. So, if during the first historical cycle, the authoritarian tendencies of populism prompted authoritarian responses from its opponents (typically the ousting of government by a military coup d'état and the subsequent proscription of the movement), the current scenario poses limitations to an openly dictatorial exercise of power or similarly authoritarian oppositional response.

The fact that openly authoritarian options are no longer an option in most of Latin America does not mean that democracy is not endangered. Populism in government poses a significant political challenge: the disfigurement of the democratic order via the implementation of processes of institutional hybridization.[46] Populism as a governmental exercise opens up the likelihood of a pattern of regime change via democratic hybridization that can result in the establishment of a particular subtype of competitive authoritarianism.[47] Such a pattern results from the efforts of populist governments to override key institutional features of liberal democracy such as the principle of separation of powers and governmental accountability, of a legitimate opposition, and of a critical public sphere.

In the name of democratic deepening, populists in power target those institutions of liberal democracy that protect the independence of civil society and the media from the state, as well as those mechanisms oriented to ensure the

45 For a more developed version of this argument, see Enrique Peruzzotti, "Populism in Democratic Times".

46 Peruzzotti "Populism as Democracy's Nemesis". For the concept of competitive authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism" *Journal of Democracy*, 13: 2, April 2000, 51–65.

47 Enrique Peruzzotti, "Regime Betterment or Regime Change?" in *Constellations. An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 24 (2017), 389–400.

principle of governmental accountability and the rule of law. If successful, they might result in the concentration of power in the presidency, the packing of the legal system with cronies to punish critics, and the dismantling of the system of governmental checks and balances. At the same time, they frequently engage in an open confrontation with the autonomous media and civil society organizations and use state resources to control oppositional social movements and civil society organizations. This is the road map populist leaders propose to overcome the democratic shortcomings of the liberal representative model via the establishment of a simplified plebiscitarian democratic model organized around the principle of identification between people and leader.

Populists reduce the complexity of interests and class positions of modern society to a confrontation between two camps and claim that those excluded from the system represent the population as a whole. Therefore, in the name of representing the people, they substitute a part for the whole, attempting to create the people-as-one.[48] Yet the manufacturing of the people-as-one is more difficult to carry out within already democratized societies than in societies that did not already enjoy democratic freedoms. The populist project of institutional simplification is likely to encounter serious opposition in complex societies that have undergone a significant degree of institutional differentiation and cultural pluralism. Populist attempts at hybridization might trigger accountability responses from the electorate, civil society, or horizontal agencies. Consequently, unlike other processes of hybridization that have as their starting point an authoritarian situation,[49] attempts at hybridization of liberal democratic regimes are likely to encounter oppositional resistance from different sectors of society or the political system. And even in those cases in which populist governments are partially successful in their attempts at silencing the critical media, restricting the institutional spaces of the opposition, or co-opting or repressing autonomous sectors of civil society, it is unlikely that they will be able to completely eliminate political dissent. Particularly in scenarios characterized by the presence of strong social actors or institutions, those groups resisting specific initiatives of hybridization might be strong enough to successfully block such initiatives or, in the worst case, to prevent the country's fall into full authoritarianism. For instance, in Morales´s Bolivia, the presence of strong social movements had played a key accountability role, forcing the administration to reverse several

48 Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism" in *The Promise and Perils of Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre, (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2015), 31–59.

49 See Peruzzotti, "Populism as democratization nemesis".

of its decisions: protest movements reversed the hike of the price of gasoline in 2011 as well as governmental plans to build a road in indigenous territory (the Tipnis national park).[50]

4 A Comparative Look at Contemporary Expressions of Populism: Lessons from Latin America

Populism does not necessarily produce authoritarian or democratic outcomes. Yet it is more likely to generate inclusive outcomes in pre-democratic contexts and authoritarian threats in democratic ones. With the exception of Venezuela, democratic regimes were strong enough to counter the threats posed by populist leaders. So, whether populist administrations succeed or not in promoting processes of regime change ultimately depends on the nature of the social and institutional contexts in which they operate: the presence of strong domestic institutions, an autonomous media, and a dense and mobilized civil society on the one hand and of external linkages such as the existence of authoritative supranational institutions on the other might result in the successful taming of the behavior of populism as government.[51] While many of those preconditions were absent in the Latin America of the 1930s and 1940s, they are present in the current scenario due to changed domestic, regional, and global circumstances.

For instance, in Argentina, kirchnerismo was unable to advance with some of its most important efforts toward institutional hybridization thanks to the mobilization of courts, the electorate, civil society, and the media to the extent that an intellectual supporter of Kirchner´s such as Ernesto Laclau complained about the failure of kirchnerismo in becoming a full populist experience.[52] Despite having arrived at the presidency in a typical populist conjuncture that combined a deep socioeconomic crisis and a generalized crisis of representation, neither Nestor nor Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner were able to fully enact a polarizing process of political identification to strengthen and consolidate their political standing. Throughout their tenures, courts, the electorate, civil society, and journalists were successful at reversing or

50 Nancy Postero, "'El pueblo boliviano de composicion plural': A Look at Plurinationalism in Bolivia" in *The Promise and Perils of Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre, (Lexington: Kentucky University Press), 414–422.

51 Levitsky and Way "The rise of competitive authoritarianism".

52 Enrique Peruzzotti, "Conceptualizing Kirchnerismo" *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10:1, 2017, 47–64.

deterring questionable policy or institutional initiatives, such as efforts to introduce a permanent re-election clause, to reform the Judiciary, or to attempt to bypass the Legislative. The presence of institutional and social resistance were impediments to a populist rupture in Argentina.[53]

The experience of Syriza in Greece, where the domestic parliamentary setting and strong supranational institutions eventually tamed some of the movement's most radical stances, is also relevant to this discussion. Syriza won the 2015 election "staging a sharp antagonism between the vast majority of the people and a privileged minority that was profiting from the crisis."[54] After obtaining 36% of the vote, Syriza was forced to enter into a coalition with a small right-wing populist and nationalist party, Independence Greek ANEL. Differently from the South American cases analyzed in this article, neither Greek parties nor the parliamentary system collapsed; nor did Syriza aim at overhauling democratic institutions via constitutional change. The regional context and pressures from the EU also played a key role at moderating the impulses of the new administration: "Pressure from outside, especially from the Troika, stifled the eagerness for radical economic policy, held also in check by the public sentiment in favor of the euro."[55] In the end, Syriza capitulated to the Troika in July 2015, even when winning a referendum against austerity policies. Its radical populist promises evaporated, and the party became less democratic and more vertical and leader-centric.[56] Syriza no longer "fights the establishment, but has in effect become the center-left component of it, as PASOK was."[57]

Hungary provides a contrasting scenario of a parliamentary European democracy that is being threatened by the process of hybridization promoted by Viktor Orbán. Despite its successful democratic transition and EU incorporation, Hungarian democracy has sharply deteriorated since the

53 Oswaldo Iazzetta, "Democracia y dramatización del conflicto en la Argentina kirchnerista (2003–2011)". In *¿Qué democracia en América Latina?,* edited by Isidoro Chreresky, (Buenos Aires: CLACSO and Promoteo, 2012), p. 285.

54 Giorgos Katsambekis, "Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power". *Constellations*, 2016, 9 doi: 10.1111/1467-8675.12234.

55 Paris Aslanidis and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Dealing with Populism in Government: the SIRIZA ANEL Coalition in Greece". *Democratization* March 2016, 12 DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2016.1154842

56 Katsambekis, "Radical Left Populism", 10.

57 Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 118.

arrival to power of Orbán.[58] In 2010, Viktor Orbán's party Fidesz won the election, securing a two-thirds majority in congress. He was elected after eight years of incompetent and corrupt Socialist rule. Once in office, he set about in a project to transform Hungary into "an illiberal new state based on national foundations." Under his government, opposition forces were marginalized, and state institutions (including the courts) were packed with Fidesz loyalists.[59] His party transformed the civil service law "to enable the party to place loyalists in what should have been non-partisan bureaucratic positions."[60] He weakened checks and balances on the executive power and adopted a majoritarian electoral system redesigning electoral rules to make it difficult for the fragmented opposition to mount an effective challenge. Orbán's administration created a regulatory body to control the content of what the media could publish, and "Fidesz loyalists directly or indirectly acquired the ownership of important media outlets, and government appointees dominated the management of public service broadcasters, leaving little space for unbiased political discourse."[61] Orbán confronted and discredited NGOs, accusing them of being controlled by foreign powers to serve external interests.[62] Like Venezuela under Chávez, his administration displaced democracy to "the grey zone between liberal democracy and fully blown authoritarianism."[63]

Different is the situation of contemporary expressions of populism in democratizing settings like Thailand.[64] In those contexts, populism might contribute to processes of political inclusion at the cost of democratic institutionalization, as it did in the Latin America of the 1930s or 1940s. Thaksin Shinawatra benefited from the 1997 constitution that strengthened the role of elected officials over the military and the monarchy. He was the first

58 As Buzogány argues, "Post-communist Hungary was considered a success story of democratic consolidation. It featured a stable party system and strong governments; it was the leading country in the region in attracting foreign direct investments (FDI) and eventually became one of the front runners being considered for European Union (EU) membership." Aron Buzogány, "Illiberal democracy in Hungary: authoritarian diffusion or domestic causation". *Democratization* 24 (7) 2017, 1307.

59 Cass Mudde, "Europe's Populist Surge," Foreign Affairs (November-December 2016) https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-10-17/europe-s-populist surge

60 Müller, *What is Populism?*, 44–45.

61 Agnes Batory, "Populists in Government? Hungary's System of National Cooperation". *Democratization* 2015, 13.

62 Müller, *What is Populism?*, 48.

63 Batory, "Populists in Government", 18.

64 Weyland, "Populism and authoritarianism".

democratically elected prime minister to complete a full term in office.[65] A billionaire who made a fortune in mobile phone technology, he was a technocrat for most of his tenure, 2001–2006. Yet in 2004, when his popularity was wavering, he started to appeal to the people, gave handouts to poor voters in the rural areas and the urban informal sector, and transformed his persona to that of a man of the people.[66] He received 58.7% of the vote in 2005 and was toppled by a coup in 2006.

Like his Latin American counterparts, Thaksin Shinawatra materially included the poor by creating health programs, giving debt relief to rural cultivators, and introducing a loan system for low-income university students. "Poverty fell from 21.3 percent to 11.3 percent during Thaksin's rein."[67] He led the political involvement of the informal sector, the rural poor, urban middle classes, and the northern small businesses and landowners. He symbolically included the people when in his reality television show he slept in tents and "talked about his sex life on radio to prove his everyday credentials with the people."[68]

Thaksin admitted that he "slipped into soft authoritarianism."[69] He disdained opponents, used dismissive remarks about Muslims in the South, promoted extrajudicial killings of drug addicts,[70] attacked the independent media, and bullied non-governmental 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. Like other populists, he led the polarization of his nation and the deinstitutionalization of democracy that ended in military coups.

65 Marcus Mietzner, "Movement Leaders, Oligarchs, Technocrats and Autocratic Mavericks: Populists in Contemporary Asia" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos de la Torre, London: Routledge forthcoming).

66 Benjamin Moffitt, "Contemporary populism and 'The People' in the Asia-Pacific Region" in *The Promise and Perils of Populism,* ed. Carlos de la Torre, (Lexington: Kentucky University Press), 296.

67 Moffitt, "Contemporary populism", 302.

68 Benjamin Moffit, *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016, 143.

69 Moffit, *The Global Rise*, 148.

70 Mietzner, "Movement Leaders".

5 Conclusions: Lessons from a Cross-Regional Perspective on Populism

This article shows how populist regimes promoted processes of social and political incorporation from the 1940s to the 1970s in Latin America, and in Thailand between 2001 and 2006, while simultaneously closing spaces to oppositional forces. Those experiences ended, both in Latin America and Thailand, due to a military intervention. Contemporary forms of populism, while promoting processes of poverty reduction and social inclusion, encounter greater domestic and international criticism when they attempt to remove distinguishing features of liberal democracy. In the past, the absence of real democratic conditions gave greater credibility to democratic claims of populism. That is no longer the case: the expansion of the democratic principle creates a more complicated environment that complicates the political aspirations of populist leaders toward political simplification. The latter does not mean that new and old democracies remain immune to the populist threat of authoritarian hybridization. On the contrary, contemporary populism is becoming liberal democracy's nemesis.[71]

The strategy of democratic hybridization might promote a gradual yet significant pattern of democratic disfigurement (to borrow Nadia Urbinati's expression).[72] If successful, it might open the door for the instauration of a populist variant of competitive authoritarianism that skews the playing field in favor of incumbents.[73] In such context, the opposition still uses elections to try to regain power, but it is forced to compete under unfavorable conditions. However, the fact that populist regimes cannot completely disregard elections and democratic legitimacy should not be underestimated, for it might also mean that they cannot completely eradicate democratic spaces and institutions.

Despite their autocratic performances of power exercise, it is unlikely that populist challengers will fade away in the global north or in the global south. Populism will continue to be an uncomfortable presence in democratic systems. Populist critics will exploit the deficits and shortcomings of real existing democracies to their political benefit and promise to return power to the people. They will politicize socioeconomic, political, and cultural exclusions and mobilize those groups that feel politically alienated by existing arrangements. Instead of condemning populism tout court, democrats should address

71 Peruzzotti, "Populism as democratization nemesis".

72 Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth and the People*, Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press (2014).

73 Levitsky and Way, "The rise of competitive authoritarianism".

populist critiques seriously while challenging their simplistic solutions that could lead to processes of democratic erosion or hybridization or to the death of malfunctioning democracies. The experience of Latin America can help us better understand the current appeal of populist leaders as well as raise concerns regarding the likely outcomes that populism as government might bring about. Drawing from the lessons of a region that has had the longest exposure to populism in power might provide important insights into the challenges that several Western democracies are encountering, including the USA.

Scholars and citizens from the global north could also learn from the mistakes of the opposition to populism in the global south. Chávez and Correa were successful in their war against the media, for example, because journalists allowed them to be in charge of the news agenda, and instead of focusing on cases of abuses of power and corruption, these journalists obsessively focused on their outrageous words and performances. These leaders also used anti-imperialist rhetoric of national sovereignty to bypass the condemnation by supranational institutions of their attacks against the media and social movements. An exclusive focus on election transparency in the moment of voting, overlooking how the electoral process blatantly favored populist incumbents, did not allow international observers to challenge elections under competitive authoritarianism.