

Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by
Carlos de la Torre and
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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Evolution of Latin American Populism and the Debates Over Its Meaning

*Carlos de la Torre and
Cynthia J. Arnson*

Late on the night of October 7, 2012, tens of thousands of flag-waving supporters of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez flooded into the streets of Caracas, chanting and singing the national anthem as they celebrated Chávez's victory in that day's presidential elections. With more than 80 percent of eligible voters casting their ballots—one of the highest turn-outs in Venezuelan history—Chávez triumphed over his opponent, Henrique Capriles Radonski, by 55.4 percent to 44.5 percent, winning in twenty-two of the country's twenty-four states. Following the announcement of his victory by the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral), Chávez addressed the crowd from "the people's balcony" of the presidential palace. Invoking the name of the nineteenth-century hero of Latin American independence, Simón Bolívar, he vowed to continue Venezuela's transition toward the "democratic and Bolivarian socialism of the twenty-first century."

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The reemergence of populism as part of the discussion of contemporary politics in Latin America is, for the most part, a product of the regime and persona of Hugo Chávez. Elected as president for the fourth time since 1998, he created and commanded a huge and loyal following among Venezuela's poor and marginalized, using the country's lavish oil revenues to finance extensive social programs. Under his charismatic leadership—which blended authoritarianism with new forms of grassroots participation—Venezuela drafted a new Constitution that demolished the political institutions of the country's pacted democracy, creating new ones subject to Chávez's control. His policies and discourse fostered polarization within Venezuela and throughout the region. And in a way that was particularly vexing for both Venezuela's neighbors and the United States, he claimed to be part of—indeed, to lead—a worldwide movement against imperialism and in solidarity with oppressed peoples. Until his diagnosis with cancer in mid-2011, he appeared set to govern indefinitely, under provisions of a constitutional reform that did away with term limits. But health issues prevented him from taking office in January 2013. Before leaving for Cuba for his fourth cancer surgery in eighteen months, Chávez designated Vice President Nicolás Maduro as his successor in case new elections needed to be called. Chávez's long absence from Venezuela launched a period of uncertainty about the country's political future and the direction of *chavismo* without Chávez.

The election of the indigenous leader Evo Morales as president of Bolivia in 2005 and of Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006 lent credence to the notion that populism was indeed resurgent in the Western Hemisphere. Similarities in the style of governance and the close personal and political affinities among Chávez, Morales, and Correa nourished a temptation to view Andean populism as one homogenous bloc, despite important differences: the unique dynamics of social mobilization in each country, the distinct nature of linkages between social movements and the state, and the role of ethnicity in shaping politics at the national level.¹ The similarities and differences among the so-called radical populists of the left are explored in detail in chapters 9, 10, and 11 of this book.

Predictably, the emergence of Chávez, Morales, and Correa at a similar point in history sparked new rounds of debate and controversy in

1. Cynthia J. Arnson with José Raúl Perales, eds., *Democratic Governance and the "New Left" in Latin America* (Washington, D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007), 4, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/NewLeftDemocraticGovernance.pdf>.

both scholarly and policy circles. Indeed, the wave of leftist electoral victories in Latin America in the late 1990s and early 2000s in such diverse countries as Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, and Venezuela focused unprecedented attention on the so-called rise of the left,² in which scholars and policymakers distinguished between the social-democratic leaders of institutionalized democracies such as Chile and Brazil and "the rebirth of an influential Latin American political tradition"³—populism—in the Andean region.⁴

Adopting narratives that link populism to irrationality, some depicted the Chávez, Morales, and Correa regimes as dangerous and irresponsible. Critics decried the resurgence of free-spending populist economic policies that defy the logic of the market, the risk to democracy itself posed by personalistic demagogues, and the dangers of an explicit anti-United States foreign policy agenda.⁵ Others had less catastrophic views but, drawing on an extensive literature on Latin America populism,

2. A rich literature on the "new left" in Latin America attempted to make sense of the wave of leftist governments that came to power in Latin America in the late 1990s and 2000s, and their implications for democracy as well as social inclusion. See, e.g., Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, eds., *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Maxwell Cameron and Eric Hershberg, eds., *Latin America's Left Turns: Politics, Policies, and Trajectories of Change* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2010); Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Jorge G. Castañeda and Marco A. Morales, eds., *Leftovers: Tales of the Latin American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Cynthia J. Arnson et al., eds., *La "Nueva Izquierda" en América Latina: Derechos Humanos, Participación Política, y Sociedad Civil* (Washington, D.C., and Buenos Aires: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Universidad Torcuato di Tella, and Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 2009), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/Nueva%20Izquierda%20Enero%2020091.pdf>. For other publications of the Latin American Program's project on "Democratic Governance and the 'New Left' in Latin America," see <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication-series/democratic-governance-and-the-new-left-bulletins>.

3. "The Return of Populism," *The Economist*, April 12, 2006.

4. For a critique of the simplistic division between the social-democratic and populist lefts, see Kenneth M. Roberts, "Repoliticizing Latin America: The Revival of Populist and Leftist Alternatives," *Woodrow Wilson Center Update on the Americas*, November 2007, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/repoliticizing_roberts.lap.pdf.

5. See, e.g., the special issue on populism in *Letras Libres* (Mexico City) 7, no. 75 (March 2005); and Hal Brands, *Dealing with Political Ferment in Latin America: The Populist Revival, the Emergence of the Center, and the Implications for U.S. Policy* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).

nonetheless shared a pessimistic and pejorative portrayal of these governments' authoritarian qualities.⁶ The regimes of Chávez, Morales, and Correa were distinguished from and contrasted with the pragmatic, moderate, "responsible" left—Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil—who embraced the fundamentals of liberal democracy as well as the precepts of the market economy. Critics of the populist left pointed especially to the instrumental use of laws, the concentration of power in the executive, the gutting of institutions that provide for checks and balances, and the restriction of fundamental freedoms (particularly freedom of the press) that foster and preserve democratic pluralism. Critics also decried the return of populist economic policies that sacrificed macroeconomic stability and the logic of the market economy for political or social goals pursued by an inefficient and bloated, albeit redistributionist, state.⁷

Others, however, portrayed the Chávez, Correa, and Morales regimes in a radically different light. They were depicted as democratic innovators whose credentials were rooted in a commitment to social justice and to the expansion of participation by previously excluded groups.⁸ The dramatic break with neoliberal orthodoxy, the state's increased involvement in the economy, the implementation of new social programs targeted at the poor, and the renewed sense of nationalism and pride were

6. Jorge Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (May 2006): 28–43. For a critique of Castañeda that builds on the concept of populism, see John French, "Understanding the Politics of Latin America's Plural Lefts (Chávez/Lula): Social Democracy, Populism and Convergence on the Path to a Post-Neoliberal World," *Third World Quarterly* 30 (2009): 349–70; see also René Antonio Mayorga, "Outsiders and Neopopulism: The Road to Plebiscitarian Authoritarianism," paper presented at the conference "The Crisis of Democratic Representation in the Andes," Kellogg Institute for International Affairs, University of Notre Dame, May 13–14, 2002.

7. Sebastian Edwards, *Left Behind: Latin America and the False Promise of Populism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

8. D. L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Gregory Wilpert, *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power: The History and Policies of the Chávez Government* (London: Verso, 2007); Pablo Stefanoni and Herve do Alto, *La Revolución De Evo Morales: De La Coca Al Palacio, Claves Para Todos* (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2006); Ernesto Laclau, "Consideraciones sobre el Populismo Latinoamericano," *Cuadernos del CENDES* 23, no. 64 (2006): 115–20; Franklin Ramírez Gallegos, "Post-neoliberalismo indocile: Agenda pública y relaciones socio-estatales en el Ecuador de la Revolución Ciudadana," *Temas y Debates* 20 (2010): 175–94.

all seen as positive developments. In this more sanguine view of populist governance, Chávez, Morales, and Correa democratized their societies, promoting new constitutions that expanded citizenship rights and established models of direct democracy with the potential to lead to better forms of participation and representation. All three presidents won elections and referenda using populist rhetoric that emphasized the empowerment of *el pueblo* (the people) as the embodiment of the nation. As a consequence of new policies, previously excluded citizens became more actively involved in politics and showed increasing levels of support for democracy. These regimes were portrayed as examples for leftists around the world that alternatives to neoliberalism and liberal democracy were possible and desirable.⁹ As Enrique Peruzzotti writes in chapter 3, many contemporary scholars have viewed the expansion of citizenship under populist regimes "as a necessary antidote to the ills of representative politics."

Our goal in this book is not to sidestep the intense polarization that exists over the issue of populism; nor do we pretend that our own scholarship is free of normative bias. Our principal aim is to explain populism's reemergence, place it in historical context, and explore the continuities and differences between past and current populist leaders. We thus compare classical populist regimes such as those of Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón and Brazil's Getúlio Vargas with neoliberal neopopulists like those of Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Argentina's Carlos Menem, and radical nationalist populists such as Chávez, Correa, and Morales. This historical lens helps us to understand more deeply the underlying conditions that give rise to populism in Latin America, its continuities and changing expressions over time, and, ultimately, its consequences for the meaning and content of democracy.

The chapters in this book explore the historical patterns of populism in the specific cases of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. And they also examine comparatively such broad themes as populism and the party system, the nature of populist discourse and appeals, the social policies of populist regimes, and the characteristics of populist democracy. Through this comparative and historical approach, we focus on the ambiguities of past and current populist

9. Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (London: Verso, 2008); Raby, *Democracy and Revolution*.

6 regimes with respect to liberal democracy. We focus on such questions as:

- Theoretically and empirically, what explains the revival of populism?
- What are the differences and continuities between the “classical” populism of the 1930s and 1940s and its current manifestations?
- What are the social bases of populism, and how do they differ from the past?
- How do leaders mobilize followers?
- How viable are these regimes, and what are their prospects for enduring over time?
- Are they developing alternative forms of democratic participation and citizenship that will improve democratic forms or ultimately undermine them as an authoritarian regime consolidates itself?

Populism itself is a contested concept. As the chapters in this volume illustrate, scholars still debate its definition—whether to employ a structuralist approach that links populism to a particular historical period and set of economic policies—notably, the import-substitution industrialization policies of the 1930s and 1940s—or to decouple politics from economics.¹⁰ In chapter 6, Hector Schamis adopts a structuralist approach to the understanding of Peronism in Argentina, anchors it in a particular historical moment in the aftermath of the Great Depression, and rejects political and discursive definitions of populism. Other chapters in the book give primacy to populism’s political and discursive aspects, or to what Kurt Weyland defines in chapter 5 as a political *strategy* for “winning and exercising power.”¹¹

10. In a classic work on the subject, the economists Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards examined the macroeconomics of populist regimes, defining economic populism in terms of a set of policies that emphasized growth and redistribution and downplayed the risks of inflation, unsustainable fiscal deficits, wage increases not accompanied by increases in productivity, and the reaction of important economic actors to non-market policies. See Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, eds., *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

11. For Kurt Weyland, populism is political strategy for “winning and exercising power” based on the direct, unmediated, noninstitutional support of large numbers of people. Elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations, and public opinion polls serve to mobilize supporters and demonstrate power capabilities. See Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22. See also Kenneth Roberts, “Neo-

Although a common definition is elusive, we can agree on some of populism’s central characteristics. As a form of governance, discourse, and political representation, populism posits and fosters division between “the people” and “the oligarchy.” The role of charismatic, personalistic leadership is central, such that the direct or quasi-direct relationship between the leader and the masses preempts and at times overrides the role of institutions in the day-to-day functioning of government. (The British historian Alan Knight has called this relationship a “particularly intense form of ‘bonding.’”)¹² Populist discourse is used to obtain office and subsequently to consolidate and hold on to power. Though mass mobilization is a feature of populism, populist manifestations differ with respect to the composition of their social base, the methods of mobilizing followers, and the nature of linkages between leaders and followers. The level of polarization generated by populist discourse and practice also varies from case to case. These variations and exceptions are research questions we aim to explore.

As Francisco Panizza indicates in chapter 4, “populism is not so much the direct relationship between the leader and the people but the leader’s ability to reach those who regard themselves as having no voice in the political system.” According to Panizza, populist leaders construct popular identities by claiming to speak “for” the people, and in so doing they combine the “politics of recognition to the politically excluded” with the politics of distribution to those disadvantaged by the economic system. Panizza uses the term “populist intervention” to capture the use of populist appeals in combination with other forms of political identification.

Under populism, politics becomes a quasi-religious and ethical struggle between good and evil, redemption and downfall.¹³ Populists characterize their rivals—of both the left and the right—as enemies of the leader, the people, and by extension, the nation. For example, in one of their

liberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case,” *World Politics* 48 (October 1995): 82–116.

12. Alan Knight, “Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (1998): 223–48.

13. José Álvarez Junco, “Magia y Ética en la Retórica Política,” in *Populismo, caudillaje y discurso demagógico*, edited by José Álvarez Junco (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas and Siglo XXI, 1987), 219–271; Loris Zanatta, “El populismo, entre la religión y la política: Sobre las raíces históricas del antiliberalismo en América Latina,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 19, no. 2 (2008): 29–45; José Pedro Zúquete, “The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 50, no. 1 (2008): 91–122.