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Exploring Populist Traditions in Latin America

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Abstract

Populism has long been a significant force in Latin American politics, deeply influencing the region's political, economic, and social landscape throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. However, despite its prevalence, populism remains a complex and contested concept, with different scholars offering their interpretations of its definition and implications. This thesis seeks to unravel the intricate nature of populism in Latin America by examining its theoretical foundations, historical evolution, and contemporary manifestations.

Through a review of the main theoretical perspectives, including the works of Ernesto Laclau, Kurt Weyland, Cas Mudde, and Dani Rodrik, this study explores the diverse ways populism is understood. Laclau's discourse theory frames populism as a mode of political articulation dividing society into "the people" and "the power bloc." At the same time, Weyland presents populism as a political strategy built around a personalistic leader relying on unmediated mass support. Mudde conceptualises populism as a thin-centred ideology that contrasts a pure people against a corrupt elite, and Rodrik provides an economic lens to analyse populism's emergence in response to globalisation.

Building on these theoretical insights, the thesis traces the historical evolution of populism from its early expressions in Latin America, beginning with leaders like Hipólito Yrigoyen in Argentina and Arturo Alessandri in Chile, through the "classical populism" of figures such as Juan Perón, to contemporary cases in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. The thesis investigates how populist leaders have harnessed mass discontent to challenge established political orders, focusing on the socio-political conditions that facilitated their rise, such as economic crises, institutional weaknesses, and opposition to neoliberal policies. Ultimately, the study sheds light on populism's implications for democracy and political representation in Latin America, highlighting its potential to both empower marginalised groups and undermine democratic institutions.

Chapter I: Defining Populism

1.1 An Introduction

'Latin America is the region with the most enduring and prevalent populist tradition.'[1] Populism has emerged as a significant political force globally, but perhaps nowhere is its influence more deeply rooted than in Latin America. Despite its prevalence, defining populism remains a challenge due to its fluid and multifaceted nature. Unlike traditional political ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, populism lacks a clear doctrinal foundation, wherein different authors and scholars continuously add on to it, making it difficult to categorise. This chapter aims to explore the various theoretical perspectives that seek to define and explain populism, with a particular focus on its manifestations in Latin America. Scholars such as Ernesto Laclau, Kurt Weyland, and Cas Mudde provide diverse frameworks that help illuminate populism's ideological, strategic, and discursive characteristics. By examining these theories, this chapter sets the stage for understanding how populism functions in Latin America, particularly how it shapes political dynamics by emphasizing the relationship between charismatic leaders and "the people" while challenging the established political order.

1.2 Ernesto Laclau: An Ideational Approach

This chapter begins by mentioning the late Argentinian scholar, Ernesto Laclau, who defined populism as a 'discourse'- that is, the idea that populism is not only an essence of politics but also an emancipatory force. This emancipatory force works by articulating the current democratic demands as antagonistic to the dominant ideology. This leads to the polarization of the social field into two poles, these beings: the 'people' vs. the 'power block'. Laclau's theory for the designation of these blocks is very abstract, as these distinctions rely on the usage of language, symbols, and narratives for their creation. One of the principal themes Laclau writes about is the concept of 'the people'. These are understood as 'empty signifiers'[2], given that populists can frame "the people" in any way that appeals to different constituencies and articulates their demands, it can result in a shared identity between different groups, facilitating

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[1] Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Edited by Oxford University Press. N.p.: Oxford University Press. Pg. 27

[2] Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 2001. Hegemony and socialist strategy. N.p.: Verso Books.

their support for a common cause. Hence populists craft an identity to attach to their groups. The friction between the two blocks stems from; a logic of difference and a logic of equivalence. The former supposes that any "legitimate demand" can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic way- such as negotiation. The latter supposes that all demands, regardless of their differential character, aggregate themselves and become 'fighting demands'[3]. This disharmony between the two groups leads to populist ruptures. According to Laclau, these take place when there are crises of political representation because democratic institutions cannot address demands individually, which allows populists to rupture the neoliberal order and draft new constitutions, create new political institutions, as well as change foreign policies. It is important to note, that for Laclau, populist ruptures are not theoretically predetermined; as they can lead to fascism or socialism. In '*Populism: A Quick Immersion*', Carlos de La Torre provides examples of how populist ruptures take place. He writes about how Chávez, Morales, and Correa got to power when democratic institutions, such as the Congress and the Judiciary were in profound crisis. Parties were viewed as instruments composed of local and foreign elites that implemented neoliberal policies, further exacerbating social inequality. These parties collapsed as the political outsiders rose to power with platforms that promised to wipe out corrupt politicians, experiment with participatory forms of democracy, strengthen the role of the state in the economy, and redistribute income and wealth. These leaders were elected to convene constitutional assemblies that with the participation of social movements and common citizens, were tasked with the drafting of new constitutions. The new constitutions in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador expanded citizens' rights while simultaneously concentrating power in the executive. The second factor contributing to populist ruptures was the widespread resistance to neoliberalism. For instance, on February 27, 1989, the Venezuelan Caracazo—a massive uprising against a gasoline price hike—was met with brutal state repression, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. This event shattered the legitimacy of Venezuela's two-party system.

Similarly, between 1997 and 2005, Ecuador saw the ousting of three presidents: Abdalá Bucaram (1996-97), Jamil Mahuad (1998-2000), and Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005), amid protests against neoliberal policies and political corruption. In Bolivia, from 2000 to 2003, a cycle of protests and political unrest led to the collapse of both the party system established in 1985 and the neoliberal economic model. Another key cause was the public's perception that politicians and neoliberal

[3]Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 2001. Hegemony and socialist strategy. N.p.: Verso Books.

elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. government. In Venezuela, oil and foreign policies shifted towards neoliberal reforms and free trade. In a bid to curb hyperinflation in 2000, Ecuador abandoned its national currency, the sucre, in favour of the U.S. dollar.

1.3 Kurt Weyland: Political Strategy

Another approach to populism I will focus on is the strategic and personalistic approach of Kurt Weyland. He defines populism as "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers."[4] This conceptualization is not inherently focused on a political doctrine, since it emphasizes what populists do rather than what they say. Although populism focuses heavily on the concept of 'the people', a unifying leader is just as needed since the term 'the people' is too heterogenous and amorphous to act solely on its own, the figure of a leader serves as a juxtaposition between their followers and their goals. They give a sense of direction and mobilize their followers towards goals they define as 'the will of the people.' Leaders frame themselves as outsiders who challenge the existing political order and corrupt elites. By using anti-establishment rhetoric to rally support, they mobilize popular discontent and create a sense of urgency for radical change, for instance, through mass rallies, and TV. The leader also attacks its enemies, personifying them as standing against the people. A leader's personalistic leadership is important since it gives its followers a sense of identity and meaning, which subsequently can manifest as a deep personal identification. Furthermore, due to the fickleness of these uninstitionalised connections, leaders rely, according to Weyland, on direct, unmediated relationships with their followers. The charisma the leaders embody, although not a central characteristic of populism, solidifies the relationship they uphold with their followers- making the core of populism. The actual strategy by which a personalistic leader can capture the connection between themselves and mass followers is carried out by, as Weyland calls it, 'the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power.' These are understood as a set of approaches and mechanisms that allow them to capture the government, and make and

[4] Weyland, Kurt. "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics." Comparative Politics, vol. 34, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22. JSTOR,

enforce authoritative decisions. In this strategy, two central components stand out: the type of political actor and the principal power capability.

When referring to the former, Weyland explains that populism revolves around a powerful individual leader rather than a party or organized group. These leaders position themselves above traditional political institutions, often sidelining elite factions and contesting organized parties. Leaders such as Juan Perón in Argentina or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela exemplify this style of leadership by concentrating power and cultivating a personal connection with the masses. The latter outlines how populist leaders draw on mass numbers for political support rather than relying on economic superiority or military power, which would represent more organized or institutional forms of influence. In this strategy, mass mobilization is key, with populist leaders organizing rallies, leveraging opinion polls, and emphasizing the “will of the people” to claim legitimacy. The personalistic bond between leader and followers is often reinforced by direct communication, media, and charismatic leadership.

1.4 Dani Rodrik: An Economic Approach

Dani Rodrik provides a comprehensive analysis of the economic roots of populism, arguing that it is a foreseeable reaction to the distributive effects of globalization. According to Rodrik, "Economic history and economic theory both provide ample grounds for anticipating that advanced stages of economic globalization would produce a political backlash." He distinguishes between two main variants of populism: left-wing populism, which highlights economic and social class inequalities and has been predominant in Latin America, and right-wing populism, which focuses on ethno-national or cultural divisions and is more prevalent in Europe. Rodrik argues that these divergent forms of populism are linked to the "relative salience of different types of globalization shocks" and how they manifest in different societies. For instance, while right-wing populism has thrived in contexts where globalization shocks have taken the form of immigration and cultural change, left-wing populism has been more pronounced in regions where economic shocks, such as rapid trade liberalization, financial crises, and the entry of foreign corporations, have been dominant.

Rodrik further explores how trade liberalization, as a core component of globalization, inherently produces "sharp distributional implications," creating both winners and losers in the global economy. He uses the Stolper-Samuelson theorem to further support his theory that there

are winners and losers to trade[5]. By suggesting that low-skilled workers in advanced economies, for example, are often made "unambiguously worse off as a result of trade liberalization." This sets the stage for populist mobilization by those adversely affected. Moreover, he notes that the backlash against globalization is not solely rooted in economic losses but also in a "perceived unfairness," where trade is seen to involve types of competition that would be unacceptable within domestic markets—such as "lax labour, environmental, tax, or safety standards in other countries."Rodrik also highlights the inadequacy of compensation mechanisms in mitigating the effects of globalization. He points out that while European countries, with their robust social safety nets, have experienced a different type of populist reaction focused more on issues like immigration and the European Union's regulatory policies, the United States, with its weaker safety nets, has seen more direct opposition to trade and globalization itself. He argues that "compensation can be very costly" and often politically difficult to implement effectively, leading to widespread discontent among those who feel left behind by globalization's benefits.

Additionally, Rodrik addresses the role of financial globalization, which has often led to financial crises and exacerbated inequality within countries. He observes that "financial globalization appears to have produced adverse distributional impacts," particularly through its impact on the incidence and severity of financial crises, which disproportionately affect the less mobile segments of the population, such as low-skilled workers. This further intensifies the populist backlash, as economic insecurities become more pronounced and are politically mobilized by populist leaders. He concludes by emphasizing the need to "rebalance globalization to maintain a reasonably open world economy while curbing its excesses." He argues for a shift in focus from capital and business interests to labour and broader societal concerns, advocating for governance structures that prioritize fairness and equitable distribution of globalization's benefits. This rebalancing, he suggests, is crucial for maintaining political and social stability in an increasingly interconnected world. Thus, Rodrik's analysis provides a compelling economic framework for understanding the rise of populism as a reaction to the distributive conflicts and perceived injustices brought about by globalization.

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[5]Rodrik, Dani. 2018. "Populism and the economics of globalization." *Journal of International Business Policy*. https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/files/dani-rodrik/files/populism_and_the_economics_of_globalization.pdf

Chapter II: Historical Context

2.1 Introduction

The objective of the following chapter is to provide historical context that explains the rise of populist movements and regimes globally, and then focus on its emergence in Latin America. Populism, as a political concept, is often loaded with negative connotations, yet its historical origins reveal a more nuanced and varied application. This chapter explores the early instances of populism, tracing its roots in different countries and movements. The term first gained traction in the late 19th century, notably among the members of the U.S. People's Party—a coalition of farmers, workers, and reform groups that opposed the entrenched power of railroads, banks, and political elites. At the same time, across the globe, Russia's narodniki movement embodied a form of populism aimed at mobilizing the rural peasantry against the Tsarist regime. In France, General Georges Boulanger's populist rise also reflected widespread discontent with the political establishment. These early forms of populism shared common traits, such as their focus on "the people" as inherently virtuous, their opposition to an entrenched elite, and their reliance on charismatic leadership. However, each movement adapted populism to its unique context, reflecting the social and political challenges of their time. By examining these foundational examples, this chapter sets the stage for understanding populism's evolution and its relevance in later movements, particularly in Latin America, where populism took on new forms and meanings.

Populism, while often understood in negative terms today, originally emerged with more neutral or even positive connotations. In its earliest usage, the term "populism" was embraced by movements that sought to represent the interests of the common people against elite powers. This chapter traces the historical trajectory of populism, both globally and within Latin America, exploring how the concept evolved from its foundational instances in 19th-century movements to its prominent role in Latin American politics.

Globally, populism first gained prominence in the United States in the late 19th century with the rise of the People's Party (or Populist Party), a coalition of farmers, labourers, and reformist groups who sought to challenge the economic and political dominance of railroads, banks, and corporate elites. At the same time, across the Atlantic in Russia, the Narodniki movement represented an early attempt to engage the rural peasantry in revolutionary action against the

Tsarist regime, offering a distinctly agrarian vision of populist mobilization. France, too, witnessed its version of populism through Boulangism, a movement led by General Georges Boulanger that sought to overthrow the parliamentary system in favour of a plebiscite form of republicanism.

Despite these varied origins, a common theme in these global movements was their appeal to "the people" as a unified, virtuous group opposed to corrupt or out-of-touch elites. This focus on the people versus the elite, combined with charismatic leadership and the celebration of rural or working-class identity, laid the groundwork for later populist movements across the world, particularly in Latin America.

Latin America, often regarded as the heartland of populism, has seen the rise of populist movements in various waves, each shaped by the region's unique political, social, and economic conditions. From the classical populism of the mid-20th century, embodied by leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, to the neoliberal populism of the 1990s, and the radical, anti-establishment populism of figures like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales in the 21st century, Latin American populism has repeatedly reshaped the political landscape. These waves of populism, while distinct, share the fundamental characteristic of positioning "the people" against perceived internal and external elites, using populist rhetoric and mass mobilization to achieve their political aims.

In this chapter, we will explore the historical roots of populism both globally and in Latin America, analyzing the various forms it has taken, the socio-political contexts that gave rise to these movements, and how populism continues to evolve in the modern era.

2.2 Concise History of Populism

Although the term 'populism' is often used in a negative light, the first usage of the term did not have negative connotations. In English, this concept was used for and by the members of the US People's Party, and was used in US newspapers in 1891 and 1892. The US People's Party was an alliance of farmers, workers, unions, temperance associations, women's groups and other reformist groups that expressed hostility to the establishment of the railroads and banks, as well s politicians in Washington. It was also a third-party force deemed that the Democratic and Republican parties were too close to each other, interest-wise. The initiatives the People's Party took, such as grassroots political education, farmer's cooperatives, and active participation in

strikes proved necessary to recruit members. In Laura Grattani's *Populism's Power,* she maintains how crucial the coalitional character of the party was to mobilize people. Another example of their initiatives and populist leitmotifs was their slogan 'Occupy Wall St.' wherein the objective was to continually occupy Wall Street, as a protest against the insecurity created by the global economic crisis.

The term populism was also used to describe the student-led movement, the narodniki in the 1860s to early 1870's. It was a revolutionary movement to sway the peasantry (who represented a large faction of the population at the time) into overthrowing the Tsarist regime. Their manifestations were known as khozhdenie v narod ('going to the people') by dressing in peasant clothes, and subsequently canvasing rural regions where the peasantry resided, to attempt the peasantry to rise against the system. However, this proved unsuccessful as the peasantry grew suspicious of the students and often turned them over to the police. This eventually led to police persecution, arrests, and political trials of the Narodniki. Although both movements were born under different social contexts, they shared one common theme- the parallel versions of populism, albeit with different understandings of agrarian workers- for the narodniki this was by placing natural Russian rural institutions, such as the obschina on a pedestal, whereas the US populists focused on more robustly hard-working American versions of the rural workers.

Although not frequently encapsulated in the history of populism, another third form of foundational populism would be the case of Boulangism in France. Between 1896 and 1898, General Georges Boulanger was a key figure in the politics of the French Third Republic. Rising as an insurgent and then his subsequent appointment as Minister for War in 1886, and attempted to overthrow the ruling parliamentary regime in favour of radical plebiscitary republicanism. His campaign and rise to prominence were owed to his antagonism towards the parliamentary regime, which he claimed spread corruption and created disconnection from the people. This led him to appeal to a coalition amongst the; peasants, workers, monarchists, and radical socialists. (Betz, forthcoming; Passmore, 2012). What united the populists of 19th-century America, Russia, and France was their shared, though varying, emphasis on celebrating the "real" rural common folk. This reflected the historical significance of agriculture and the rural-urban divide of the time. Beyond this, and relevant to later populist movements, these examples exhibited core populist traits: a direct appeal to "the people" as inherently virtuous, hardworking, or disadvantaged, and a strong opposition to an entrenched elite. They also championed the idea

that democratic politics should be more connected to the people. National pride, mass mobilization, and charismatic leadership were key features of all three movements.

2.3 Emergence of Populism in Latin America

Latin America is the land of populism[6], and as such, it proves helpful to outline the different phases of populism that have emerged in the region; classical, neoliberal, and radical populism. Classical populism emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, the Great Depression plunged the United States, which consequently led to a crisis spreading to neighbouring regions. During this time, there was a crisis in the oligarchical social order in Latin America, which characterized itself by 'combining liberal-inspired constitutions with patrimonial practices and values in predominantly rural societies'. This constant reliance on the subordination of rural workers, and the exclusion of the majority of the populace in the sociopolitical sphere at the hands of the institutional elites quickly crumbled once social changes took hold of the region. The mix of modernization, a rapid urbanization process, industrialization, and a broad mobilization of the 'lower classes', allowed for populists to emerge by constructing heterogenous class alliances and mobilizing excluded sectors of everyday society. Examples of paradigmatic 'classical populists' were: Brazil with Getúlio Vargas, Juan Domingo Perón's Argentina, and Lázaro Cárdenas's Mexico. In the mentioned cases, populist presidents pursued nationalist and economic reforms. Populism also appeared in nations with varying rates of modernization and industrialization: Victor Haya de la Torre in Peru, and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador.

The second wave of populism is understood as neoliberal populism, this took place at the beginning of the 1990's. The stark difference from the first wave arises from the fact that the first wave focused on including marginalized communities in the political sphere. This wave arose in nations that already had political parties but were divided by differing views on economic reforms. The most exemplary examples of neoliberal leaders would be; Argentina's Carlos Menem, Brazil's Fernando Collor de Mello, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori. Neoliberal populists were able to win elections by framing the elite as being responsible for the profound economic crises their countries went through at the end of the 1980s, as they blamed the elite politicians for appropriating the rightful sovereignty of the people. Neoliberal populists, however, either ran as

[6]Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Edited by Oxford University Press. N.p.: Oxford University Press. Pg. 260

political outsiders, as was the case for Fujimori and Fernando Collor de Mello. Others, such as Menem, challenged existing political leadership in their nations. The success of neoliberal populists is rooted in their portrayal of the institutions, as being out of touch with the needs and desires of the people. For example, Fujimori became a symbol of the rejection of traditional political elites by mobilizing the common non-white people against the white elite. This is best recorded when Fujimori opened a major rally in a Lima shantytown with the phrase, “Here we are, the chinos and the cholitos”. Fujimori, like many other Peruvians with indigenous roots, was the child of immigrants who faced challenges with their "deficient" Spanish and were marginalized by the traditional white elites. This led to the success of his slogan "a president like you," particularly successful.

The third and current wave of populism became known as radical, or anti-establishment populism. Its emergence began in the late 20th century when Hugo Chávez won the Venezuelan elections in 1998. Subsequently, this spread to other countries, for example; Evo Morales’s electoral triumph in Bolivia, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. The characteristics of this wave of populism are the usage of Americanism ideology and anti-imperialistic rhetorics, drawing similarities with the first wave. However, radical populists showed hostility towards traditional political parties, which were regarded as instruments of local and foreign elites that used neoliberal politics to further induce social inequality. These leaders rose to power with platforms that promised to wipe away corrupt politicians and traditional parties, experiment with participatory forms of democracy, and implement policies to redistribute income. For example, Hugo Chávez established the PSUV, ‘Partido Socailista Unido de Venezuela’ (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), and Evo Morales’s MAS, Movimiento Al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism) party. The appeal of this populist discourse stems from the dissatisfaction with the neoliberal reforms that were implemented in Latin America in the last decades of the 20th century, which exacerbated high levels of socioeconomic inequality in the region.

Chapter III: The leader and his followers

3.1 Introduction:

The relationship between a populist leader and their followers is a central element of populism, particularly in Latin America, where charismatic leadership has often played a decisive role in political mobilisation. Populist leaders cultivate a personal connection with their followers, bypassing traditional institutions and appealing directly to "the people." This chapter explores the dynamics of that connection, examining how leaders use charisma, mass media, and symbolism to reinforce their authority and build loyalty among supporters. By analysing case studies of prominent Latin American populists such as Juan Perón, Hugo Chávez, and Evo Morales, this chapter investigates how these leaders craft their image, develop a narrative of heroic leadership, and foster a sense of identity among their followers. It also examines the role of the body in populist leadership, both as a symbol of strength and as a means of establishing closeness with the public. The analysis highlights the powerful, often personalistic bond between populist leaders and their supporters, emphasising how this relationship serves as a critical source of legitimacy and political power.

3.2: Links between the Leader and Followers

There are four subtypes of linkages between leaders and followers in the subtypes of populism discussed in this chapter: populist organisations, clientelism, the mass media, and populist discourse. Populist organizations are based on low levels of institutionalization[7]. This means that leaders set their agendas and strategies, thus rendering it difficult to create a different image than the one they put forth. Given that populist organizations do not value pluralism since they view the people as one unified, homogenous entity, the people can only be organised under organisations loyal to their leaders. Populist organisations can take various forms, some are grassroots, and others are created top-down by their leaders. Some populists, such as José María Velasco Ibarra and Alberto Fujimori, challenged the political powers of elites but created

[7] Hawkins, Kirk. 2008. “La organización populista. Los Cículos Bolivarianos en Venezuela,” in Carlos de la Torre and Enrique Peruzzotti (eds), *El retorno del Pueblo*. Quito: FLACSO, 125–60.

temporary organizations. On the other hand, Perón and Chávez built strong organizations to confront the economic, symbolic, and political power of elites.

Another form of linkage between leaders and followers is via political organisations. These organisations can be grass-roots whilst others are created top-down. In Europe, right-wing populist parties fostered a sense of community by creating populist 'civil society associations, as Carlo Ruzza defined it.[8]These were formed in the name of "an undifferentiated, self-evident, and self-justified category of the people." Ruzza differentiates between populist-xenophobic associations and nationalistic-territorial; groups. The former defines the people and its enemies within racial categories, such as neo-nazi groups and the French National Rally. The latter use culturally essentialist categories, however, both aim at creating strong identities and a sense of community. In Latin America, these populist organisations are created when a leader's confrontation with oligarchy is about politics, economics, and culture[9]. The most prominent example of these types of populist organisations created by Chávez's government, such as 'Circulos Bolivarianos' (Bolivarian Circles). To advance the revolutionary movement, President Chávez promoted the creation of Bolivarian Circles in June 2001. These small groups, consisting of seven to fifteen members, were designed to study Bolivarian ideology, address local issues, and defend the revolution[10]. At their peak, Bolivarian Circles had around 2.2 million members and played a significant role in the large demonstrations that reinstated Chávez after the attempted coup in April 2002. However, Kirk Hawkins and David Hansen (2006: 127) pointed out that the mobilization of Bolivarian Circles lacked the level of autonomy necessary for a functioning democracy. Their research revealed that while these circles provided a platform for participation among the poor, they often acted as clientelist networks, funnelling resources into areas with strong presidential support.

Clientelism also plays a fundamental role in how populists create bonds with their followers. In short. Clientelism is understood as an interpersonal form of exchange between the "patrón" (the boss) and the "cliente" (customer)[11]. Carrió Menéndez highlights the characteristics of these exchanges; (a) it is carried out by actions of power and unequal social footing, (b) eminently

[8] Torre, Carlos de l., ed. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*. N.p.: Routledge. pg. 30.

[9] Roberts, K. M. (2006). *Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America. Comparative Politics*, pg. 38.

[10] Raby, D. L. 2006. Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today. London: PlutoPress

[11] Chasqui. 1986. *Reseña de La conquista del voto en el Ecuador: de Velasco a Roldos de Amparo Menéndez Carrión.* Chasqui 19 pg. 88.

utilitarian and based on reciprocity, and (c) paternalistic and private. He also highlights how these exchanges seize the moment the expected benefits are not materialised. Populist parties are organised through formal bureaucratic party networks and clientelist informal networks that distribute resources, information, and jobs to the poor. The first round of studies on political clientelism showed that the poor were not irrational masses that voted for populist demagogic candidates, but rather the poor voted instrumentally for the candidate with the best capacity to deliver goods and services.

In many (but not limited to) Latin American nations, the poor live under dire socioeconomic and legal conditions, often in environments of violence and insecurity. Because these constitutionally prescribed rights are only sometimes respected, the poor rely on politicians and their networks of brokers to access basic services, for example, accessing a bed in a public hospital, or a job. Brokers are the intermediaries between the politicians and poor people. They hoard information and resources and are connected to wider networks and cloques of politicians and state officials. Formal bureaucratic rules work together with personalist cliques and networks of friends who dispense "favours," including corruption. However, given that the poor can choose to leave or join a different network, the broker's position is unstable. There are a number of limitations as well, since the poor can; exit a network, choose not to vote as the broker requested, or feel compelled to repay a favour to the broker. This unreliable nature of political support thus gives some advantages to the poor. For this exchange system to prove successful, politicians must deliver some resources.

Mass media also plays a detrimental role in how populists win elections. In 'The Rise of Global Populism' Benjamin Moffitt states that 'media processes need to be put at the centre of our thinking about contemporary populism." Populists have used this method to blur the lines between politics and entertainment. An example of this would be how Eva Perón used the radio to speak directly with her followers; transforming politics into a melodrama wherein she exalted her love for the poor. For Eva Perón, the people were always 'marvellous', Perón was always 'glorious' and the oligarchy was '*egoísta y vende patria'* (selfish and sell-outs). But radio was not the only means populists used mass media, television further contributed to blurring the lines between politics and entertainment. Populists continue to use their exposure on television for means of vote-gathering, such as mass rallies and clientelist networks. For example, the former Argentinian president, Carlos Menem used to visit common people in their neighbourhoods in

his own *'menemovil'*. Television also allowed populists to broadcast their personas, allowing them to have control over their perception, and tweaking it was necessary. An example would be how Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa developed weekly television programs wherein citizens were informed of projects, policies, and news agenda, but were equally entertained by the antics they carried out in their shows- such as singing and mocking political opponents. For Chávez, his television broadcast '*Aló Presidente*' would aid in solidifying his emotionally charged connection with the Venezuelan masses.[12] In nations without traditional forms of public media, these venues worked as means to propagate propaganda at the executive level. Laws were created and local state institutions controlled the private media that could publish, sanctioning any infractions committed by journalists or other media owners- deteriorating the quality of debates in the public sphere.

Finally, the role of populist discourse plays a fundamental role in the political strategy of political leaders, since it frames social reality in that appeals to 'the people' whilst positioning the elites as adversaries. This references a Manichean worldview, where complex societal issues are boiled down to: 'the pure people' against the 'corrupt elite.' By framing this group as the essence of a nation, it repelled the oligarchy that were terrified of populist challenges. For example, populistic rhetoric in Latin America has, historically speaking, exalted the poor and mestizo (racially mixed) folk as having an antagonistic relationship with the oligarchy. During the 1952 Bolivian revolution, Indigenous identity was sidelined in favour of mestizo identity, with class-based language attempting to obscure ethnic distinctions[13]. However, the influence of indigenous organizations gradually reshaped the discourse of who constitutes "the people." Evo Morales and his party, Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), replaced the mestizo as the symbol of citizenship with the indigenous figure. Morales's political success is partly attributed to his ability to express the anxieties brought about by globalization while positioning indigenous people as the core of Bolivia's national identity. This led to the term "ethno-populism" being coined[14] to describe Morales's effective combination of populist and ethnic-inclusive rhetoric. The conflict was framed as a struggle between indigenous communities, who fought to protect

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[12] FRAJMAN E. Broadcasting Populist Leadership:"Broadcasting Populist Leadership: Hugo Chávez and Aló Presidente." *Journal of Latin American Studies 46,* no. 3 (2014): 501–26. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X14000716.

[13] Canessa, Andrew. 2006. "Todos somos indígenas: toward a new language of national political identity," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 25(2): 241–63.

[14] Madrid, Raúl. 2012. *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bolivia's natural resources, and the oligarchy, which had handed those resources over to imperialist and foreign interests.

Furthermore, populist discourse is heavily reliant on emotional appeal and mobilization. Through rhetorically charged language, populist leaders evoke a sense of urgency and crisis, amplifying feelings of fear, anger, and resentment towards the elite. This emotional connection is crucial for mobilizing large segments of the population, particularly those who feel alienated from traditional political institutions. Additionally, populists favour direct communication methods, such as rallies or media appearances, to bypass institutional channels and strengthen the personal bond between the leader and the people, further enhancing their ability to rally mass support. Through these strategies, populist leaders create a powerful emotional and symbolic link with their followers, positioning themselves as the defenders of the people's interests against a corrupt elite.

3.3 Charisma: Missions and Myth

Max Weber writes 'The bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority under a mission believed to be embodied in him.'[15] Although charisma is not a definitional component of populism, the widespread belief in a leader's extraordinary capacities sets the foundations for how leaders connect with their followers, and how they can acquire the special intensity that gives rise to and sustains populism. If people are convinced of a leader's salvational and redemptive qualities[16], they will offer profound commitment. This bond is direct and bypasses any organisational intermediation; to the point that the borrowed authority acts as the appointed 'disciples' of the leader. Charisma is thus a great example of the "glue" that can hold together a leader's direct relationship to a mass of followers and that can give this connection a deeply personal character.

According to Weber, leaders must demonstrate their charisma "in the eyes of their adherents" One of the ways this relationship is solidified, is through the performance of heroic acts. An example of this is Hugo Chávez, who led an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1992 against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Despite the failure, Chávez made two statements that resonated with Venezuelans: "I assume the responsibility" and "For now." Journalists Cristina Marcano and

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[15] de la Torre, Carlos. 2019. *Populisms: A Quick Immersion*. N.p.: Tibidabo Publishing. pg.69
[16] Zúquete, José Pedro. 2007. *Missionary Politics in Contemporary Europe*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Alberto Barrera Tyszka, in their biography of Chávez, highlighted the significance of his words. The first was striking in a country where politicians rarely took responsibility for anything, and the second was seen as either a threat or a suspenseful statement akin to a "cinematic cliffhanger." Chávez, though initially a failed coup leader, became a symbol of democratic resistance against a corrupt neoliberal political establishment. His military red beret evolved into a symbol of defiance against a failed, exclusionary democracy, and many Venezuelans began to wear it proudly. In the absence of heroic performances, leaders and their followers tend to mythologise and exaggerate their achievements and life stories. For example, Rafael Correa claimed he was extraordinary because he studied with scholarships, and because he dedicated his life to serving others, he referenced how he was a leader of the catholic university student movement, a lay missionary with indigenous people and a world-recognized scholar. This proved to be an exaggeration when journalists Mónica Almeida and Ana Karina López uncovered in their biography of Correa entitled 'El Séptimo Rafael' how he only had a one-year scholarship while attending high school; he did not earn merit scholarships to study in Louvain or at the University of Illinois at Urbana, and did not excel as a scholar.

Populist leaders, even when they don't, claim to come from humble and working-class origins. Due to their hard work, superior intelligence and self-interest in serving their nations and their peoples, they acquire their extraordinariness. Correa claimed to come from a working-class background when he was the child of a downwardly mobile middle-class family with ties to the elite. In *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, Carlos de la Torre explains how Ecuador's former president, Abdalá Bucaram, portrayed himself as a man of humble origins who both understood and was part of "el pueblo" (the people). Being the son of Lebanese immigrants, Bucaram faced discrimination from elites who criticised his taste and habits. He emphasised his connection to the average Ecuadorian through his casual manner of dressing, love for soccer, and eating habits, which were more aligned with the poor. Bucaram's populist rhetoric emphasised that despite his humble beginnings, he had risen to become a successful businessman, politician, and lawyer. This dual identity, both as a member of the pueblo and as someone superior in character, formed the basis of his leadership. His struggles, such as being exiled, imprisoned, and sued, allowed him to claim solidarity with the poor, whom he argued also suffered from the biases of the justice system. His sacrifices for the people and his hardships made him a self-declared "leader of the

poor," justifying his right to the presidency. Bucaram's narrative thus combined a deep identification with the struggles of the people while asserting his moral and personal superiority.

Charismatic leaders also tend to invoke myths. Some are religiously motivated, for example, that of Hugo Chávez. His charismatic persona symbolised drew on the myths of two powerful figures: Simón Bolívar, the liberator, and Jesus Christ, the saviour. His political movement, the new Venezuelan constitution, and the nation itself were rebranded as "Bolivarian," with Chávez presenting himself as the heir to Bolívar's mission of liberation for both Venezuela and Latin America. He promoted an image of Bolívar as a revolutionary hero of the people, even altering the traditional depictions of Bolívar to reflect a darker skin tone, aligning with the identity of his followers, despite Bolívar's family background as slave owners. Chávez frequently invoked religious imagery, referring to Jesus as his "commander in chief" and likening his leadership to Christ's sacrifice. He portrayed himself as willing to die for the people, equating his suffering from cancer with the passion of Christ. During a televised Holy Week prayer in 2012, Chávez begged for more time to continue his mission for Venezuela and its people, crying for Christ to give him the burden of the cross, thorns, and blood in exchange for more time. Chávez's followers elevated him to a saint-like figure, with people pleading for his help as if he had the power to heal. After his death, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, solidified Chávez's transformation into a secular saint. Chávez was buried in a shrine symbolizing the "renaissance of the homeland," with his sarcophagus inscribed as "Supreme Commander of the Bolivarian Revolution." A portrait of Bolívar alongside Chávez completed this symbolic trinity, reinforcing Chávez's legacy as a larger-than-life leader intertwined with national myths and religious symbolism.

3.4 The Body and the Leader

As mentioned before, the figure of the leader is essential for their mission. Weber argued that charismatic leaders possess unique qualities, both physical and intellectual, that are viewed as extraordinary or even "supernatural, "qualities that set them apart from others[17]. These leaders claim superiority through innate abilities, revolutionary ideas, or their role at the centre of the social order. Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa exemplified this by demonstrating relentless work ethics during their presidencies, contacting advisors at all hours, and portraying themselves as

[17] de la Torre, Carlos. 2019. *Populisms: A Quick Immersion*. N.p.: Tibidabo Publishing pg.87

constantly working for the liberation of their people. Correa even disregarded neoliberal economists as accounts and proclaimed he was the only economist who knew how to lead the hyper-modernisation of Ecuador. Leaders like Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez developed new ideologies, Perón's Justicialism in the 1950s and Chávez's twenty-first-century Socialism, that sought to overcome the perceived failures of both communism and liberal capitalism. These ideologies were promoted as solutions not only for their nations but for the wider world. The leader's body, representing the people's struggle for liberation, became a central symbol in these movements.

Populists also use their bodies in the literal sense to connect with followers, physically and symbolically, thus demonstrating their connection to the people. Leaders like Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and Evo Morales regularly travelled to their countries, engaging with citizens directly through touch, conversation, and public appearances. This close, physical interaction helped cultivate a sense of intimacy and accessibility, much like Abdalá Bucaram, who mimicked the style of charismatic religious leaders by walking among the crowd after his speeches, allowing his followers to touch him as if he were a saviour figure. In addition to physical closeness, populists often emphasize their hyper-masculinity to assert dominance and leadership. For example, Bucaram ridiculed his political opponents with derogatory comments about their masculinity, going as far as to say that one of his rivals had no balls. Chávez highlighted his military background, portraying himself as a self-sacrificing soldier who gave up his career for the good of the nation. This display of hyper-masculinity reinforces their image as strong, decisive leaders.

Populist leaders also frequently position themselves as paternal figures, claiming to be the "fathers" of their nations. Chávez, for instance, organized his supporters into battalions, invoking militaristic fatherhood to lead his people in the fight against imperialism. Similarly, Juan Perón referred to his followers as "Peronist soldiers," and Getulio Vargas claimed the title "father of the poor.". Furthermore, Hipólito Mejilla, the former president of the Dominican Republic, has made the phrase 'Llego Papá' (Dad has arrived) as the slogan of his political campaign. Thus alluding This paternalistic metaphor, as noted by Karen Kampwirth, in *Gender and Populism in Latin America* "turns citizens into permanent children. It turns a politician into someone who understands the interests of citizens- even when they do not- and who may punish wayward children who fail to recognise their wisdom". The job of a father never ends, suggesting that the

leader’s authority is eternal, often justifying their attempts to remain in power indefinitely, as seen with leaders like Chávez and Morales.

Chapter IV: Critiques and Challenges

4.1 Introduction:

While populism can create opportunities for political inclusion and mobilize previously marginalized groups, its impact on democracy is often more complex and problematic. This chapter explores the critiques and challenges posed by populism, particularly its tendency to undermine democratic institutions and facilitate the rise of competitive authoritarianism. Focusing on Latin American examples, such as the regimes of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, this chapter investigates how populist leaders frequently erode checks and balances, concentrate power in the executive, and suppress opposition forces. It also discusses the concept of "ethno-populism," where leaders integrate ethnic appeals into their populist strategies, and how populist discourse can both empower marginalized groups and deepen political polarization. By examining the darker side of populism, this chapter highlights the fragile balance between inclusionary rhetoric and authoritarian practices, raising critical questions about the long-term sustainability of populist governance in the region.

4.2 Ethno-populism

Latin American populists started to introduce ethnic elements into their campaigns at the beginning of the 1990s, starting to appeal to Indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, not as members of ethnic communities, but rather as workers and peasants. Ethno-populism, as Raúl Madrid defines it, is a discourse and political strategy that combines both ethnic and populist appeals. Ethnicity is understood as a category “in which descent-based attributes are necessary for membership.” These attributes are understood as characteristics that are hard to change, such as native language or racial phenotypes. Nevertheless, people often belong to multiple ethnic groups and may switch their ethnic identification over time. In Latin America, the central ethnic

groups include; Indigenous people, afro-latinos, whires, and mestizos (mixed). However, the boundaries between them tend to be vague.[18]

One on hand, this has proven to be positive given that it often mobilizes marginalized ethnic groups, particularly Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, who have historically been excluded from political power. Ethno-populism proves to be more inclusive in this region since it has lower levels of ethnic polarisation, than other regions such as Europe. Although this has its positive impacts, such as: promoting greater ethnic inclusion, and increased political participation amongst Indigenous people and Afro-Latinos. For example, In Bolivia, Indigenous people represented only 4 per cent of the legislature between 1993-1997, but by 2009-2013, they constituted 25 per cent, all of them belonging to MAS. with many of them appointed directly by member social movements.[19] Lucio Gutiérrez and Evo Morales also appointed indigenous people to key governmental positions, including the Minister of Foreign Relations and the Minister of Agriculture in both countries. In addition, the Morales administration reformed the constitution to mandate ethnic representation in the national legislature and the national and departmental electoral tribunals. Other ethno-populist leaders, such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Ollanta Humala, and Alejandro Toledo, also brought in Indigenous people and Afro-Latinos into their governments.

At the same time, ethno-populism has proven to be used to undermine democracy by concentrating power, weakening horizontal accountability, and attacking the media and political opposition. When they came to power, Morales, Correa, and Chávez all reformed their nation's constitutions for their benefit. In Morales' case, this allowed him to be re-elected and expanded the legislature to tighten the MAS's control of it. Morales also used a variety of methods to gain control over the electoral institute, which consequently supervises the elections and departmental governments. Similarly, Chávez oversaw a constitutional reform that expanded his powers, allowed the immediate reelection of the president, dissolved the legislature, overhauled the country's electoral laws, and allowed the recall of officeholders. He subsequently expanded and stacked the Supreme Court, and asserted his control of the National Electoral Council, the

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[18] "Emergence of Ethno-populism in Latin America." 2018. In Routledge Handbook of Global Populism, edited by Carlos de l. Torre. N.p.: Taylor & Francis Group.

[19] Agrawal, Nina, Richard André, Ryan Berger, and Wilda Escarfuller. 2012. "POLITICAL REPRESENTATION & SOCIAL INCLUSION: A comparative study of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala." Edited by Christopher Sabatini. *Americas Society and Council of the Americas*. https://www.as-coa.org/sites/default/files/ComparativeFINAL-1.pdf.

Comptroller's Office, and the Central Bank.[20] Ethnopopulists have also undermined democracy by attacking the media and their political opposition. The Chávez administration was notorious for attacking the opposition, pushing some out of their offices, jailing them, or sending them into exile. Rafael Correa also implemented similar methods to crush the opposition, passing laws that allowed the government to shut down non-governmental organisations that distributed the public peace. Independent media and critics were also the subject of these attacks, The Chávez administration, for example, confiscated assets and refused to renew Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), an independent TV channel and media firm, leading to its shutdown in 2007. These measures have undermined democracy and exacerbated political polarization. According to Freedom House, these measures have weakened democracy and intensified political polarization. When Chávez assumed office in Venezuela in 1998, the country had a political rights rating of 2 and a civil liberties rating of 3 (with 1 being the highest score in both indices). By 2012, his final full year in power, Venezuela's ratings had deteriorated to 5 in both categories (with 7 being the lowest possible score).

4.2 Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism

As mentioned previously, populism can have positive effects on a nation's democratization process by mobilizing traditionally marginalized sectors of society. By giving a voice to groups that feel underrepresented by elites, populists create new institutional channels for inclusion, expanding participation in the public sphere. They often introduce new rights, implement socioeconomic policies, and challenge entrenched hierarchies. These measures can contribute to democratization by reducing the social and cultural divide between elites and the masses.

However, its effects on liberal democracies take a more ambiguous form. In already democratic regimes, the effects of populism are more limited. In contemporary Latin America, successful populists almost invariably trigger a slide into competitive authoritarianism.[21] These are understood as regimes wherein formal democratic institutions exist and are meaningful, but ones where incumbent abuse results in the inability of the opposition to compete. These regimes are considered competitive, in the sense that the opposition uses elections to contest for power, yet the competition is unfair. State institutions, like the judiciary, security forces, tax agencies, and

[20] Corrales, Javier. 2010. "The Repeating Revolution: Chávez's New Politics and Old Economics." In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 28–56. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511778742.002.
[21] Levistky, Steven, and James Loxton. n.d. "Populism and competitive authoritarianism in Latin America."

electoral authorities are politicised and are used to weaken their opponents. Government critics are harassed in various forms, such as harassment, surveillance, blackmail, ‘legal’ persecution, tax violations, or corruption; attacks by government-sponsored mobs; and occasional arrest or forced exile. In addition, the government’s abuse of state resources and bullying and co-optation of private media results in highly unequal access to media and finance, tilting the playing field against the opposition. Well-known cases of competitive authoritarianism in Latin America include Argentina under Juan Perón, Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Dominican Republic under Joaquín Balaguer, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, Peru under Alberto Fujimori, and Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Levistky and Loxton outline three main reasons why populism tends to push fragile democracies into competitive authoritarianism for at least three reasons.

The first reason stems from the fact that populists are political outsiders, and have little experience within institutions of representative democracy. Generally speaking, politicians spend their livelihoods studying and working within legislatures or subnational governments, and it is through this process that many acquire the skills necessary to make these institutions work, such as negotiation and coalition-building. Furthermore, because the institutions of representative democracy are their livelihood, professional politicians are central to their survival. Populist outsiders, as the word suggests- are outsiders: Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Jorge Serrano in Guatemala, Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, and Lucio Gutiérrez and Rafael Correa in Ecuador had never held elected office before winning the presidency. They lack the experience in the everyday politics of Congress, the judiciary, or subnational government, outsiders often lack the skill, patience, and commitment needed to pursue their goals within existing democratic institutions. Not having been socialised into democratic politics, they may also lack a normative commitment to those institutions.

Secondly, successful populists secure an electoral mandate to dismantle the political establishment. The mantra of their campaigns is that the elite and its institutions are corrupt and exclusionary, making the current regime undemocratic. Leaders like Fujimori, Chávez, Morales, and Correa claimed that their countries were governed by "partyarchies", regimes where political parties, not the people, held power. They vowed to replace these systems with a more "authentic" democracy. When populist candidates win on these grounds, they claim the authority to "rebuild" the political system. Efforts to change the constitutional order often receive

widespread public backing. However, this poses a serious challenge to the existing regime, as the very institutions populists target, such as political parties, legislatures, and judiciaries are essential to representative democracy. Dismantling these structures without undermining the democratic system proves to be extremely difficult.

Thirdly, newly elected populists usually confront hostile institutions of horizontal accountability. As aforementioned, populists tend to be political outsiders, lacking strong parties, and thus, usually fail to translate their victories in presidential elections into legislative majorities. For example, Fujimori and Gutiérrez had few partisan allies in Congress, and Correa did not even field legislative candidates when he first ran for president in 2006. Moreover, newly elected outsiders have typically not had any influence over past appointments to the Supreme Court, the electoral authorities, and other state agencies. After taking office, then, most populists confront legislatures, judiciaries, and bureaucracies controlled by the very establishment elites they had promised to bury during the presidential campaign. This presents a dilemma. Populists could respond to this challenge by behaving like ordinary presidents, negotiating and sharing power with traditional parties. However, reconciling with the elite would constitute a betrayal of their promises to bury them.

4.3 **Economic Consequences of Populism**

The economic consequences of populism often involve a tension between short-term gains and long-term instability. Populist leaders tend to implement expansive welfare programs and state subsidies aimed at providing immediate relief to large segments of the population. While these policies often boost the leaders' popularity, they frequently lead to economic mismanagement, contributing to inflation, fiscal deficits, and eventual economic crises. For example, The Venezuelan experience under Hugo Chávez is a notable example, where increased public spending, primarily funded by oil revenues, resulted in temporary social benefits but led to massive debt and economic collapse when oil prices fell[22]

In addition to short-term economic mismanagement, populism frequently adopts an anti-globalization stance, employing protectionist policies that hinder international trade and foreign investment. Leaders criticize the adverse effects of globalization on national industries

[22] Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Edited by Oxford University Press. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

and often promote policies to protect local markets. However, such protectionism can undermine long-term economic growth by isolating the nation from global markets, limiting technological advancement, and discouraging investment. Politically, populist strategies further contribute to instability. By framing political discourse as a battle between 'the people' and 'corrupt elites,' populism heightens polarization, making consensus-building and governance more difficult. This polarization often results in unstable governance, particularly when populist leaders bypass institutional checks and balances in favour of personalistic leadership. Without strong institutions or a clear succession plan, countries governed by populists are often left vulnerable to governance crises once the charismatic leader exits the political stage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis underscores the multifaceted nature of populism in Latin America, revealing it as both a tool for democratization and a potential threat to liberal democratic institutions. While populist leaders have often succeeded in mobilizing marginalized sectors of society, giving voice to those historically excluded from political participation, their reliance on personalistic leadership and anti-establishment rhetoric has frequently led to the weakening of institutional checks and balances. The study of populism through the lenses of scholars like Ernesto Laclau, Kurt Weyland, and Dani Rodrik highlights the diverse interpretations of the phenomenon, each shedding light on different aspects of how populism emerges and operates.

In Latin America, populist movements have repeatedly shaped the political landscape, from the classical populism of the mid-20th century to the more radical, anti-establishment variants of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Leaders such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales have used populist strategies to challenge entrenched elites, mobilize mass support, and implement transformative political agendas. However, these leaders' tendencies to concentrate power in the executive branch, undermine opposition forces, and bypass institutional mechanisms have often led to the rise of competitive authoritarian regimes.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the broader understanding of populism as a political phenomenon deeply rooted in the socio-economic conditions of the region. While populism

offers opportunities for political inclusion and redistribution, its long-term consequences for democracy in Latin America remain contested. The challenge moving forward is to recognize the potential benefits of populism while being vigilant of its capacity to erode the very institutions that safeguard democratic governance.

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