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978-0-521-76503-9 - Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective

Kirk A. Hawkins

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

The provision for recall referendum is ... giving shape to a new democratic model in Venezuela, not the old democracy of the elites.

Hugo Chávez, June 2004¹

On 3 June 2004, Venezuela's National Electoral Commission (Consejo Nacional Electoral, or CNE) announced that a recall election would be held against President Hugo Chávez in August.²

The announcement marked a significant victory for the opposition after years of tumultuous, polarizing conflict. Earlier, in April 2002, a violent clash between opposition demonstrators and government supporters in Caracas precipitated a military coup that removed Chávez from power for 36 hours. Subsequent efforts at reconciliation failed, and for two months the opposition led a devastating national strike that paralyzed the oil industry and much of the private sector. Finally, in May 2003, after negotiations sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS), representatives of the government and the opposition signed an agreement committing both sides to a legal, non-violent solution and opening the way for the presidential recall.

The recall process formally began with a signature drive by the opposition from 28 November to 1 December 2003. The effort generated an overwhelming response in favor of the recall, with 3.4 million signatures collected,

¹ From his speech on the evening of 3 June, accepting the results of the recall petition drive. Accessed at <http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve>.

² The following account draws from multiple sources, especially the Comprehensive Report by The Carter Center, "Observing the Venezuela Presidential Recall Referendum," published in February 2005 (The Carter Center 2005b), and reports on the election by Gutiérrez (2004), McCoy (2005), Kornblith (2005), and Hellinger (2005), as well as my own observations and campaign literature that I collected. Totals for the UBEs and electoral patrols are taken from Chávez's speech at the close of the campaign. Information on the structure of the Comando Maisanta, as well as Chávez's 3 June speech, was downloaded from the presidential Web site <http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve>.

well beyond the 2.5 million required by the constitution. The process nearly stalled after the CNE took five months to verify the signatures and then, in a controversial decision, found irregularities in over 900,000 of them. After violent demonstrations by members of the opposition and earnest efforts by the Carter Center and the OAS, the CNE and opposition agreed to allow a new “repair” period at the end of May in which affected citizens could reaffirm their initial signatures. At the completion of this new process, the CNE accepted that sufficient signatures had been collected and made its announcement.

The opposition's hard-fought victory was short, however. On the evening of 1 December, Chávez appeared on television and gave a speech that reclaimed the moral high ground. He publicly accepted the CNE's decision and affirmed his movement's unwavering support for democracy, then defiantly called on his supporters to organize and defeat the opposition. He baptized their effort the *Campaña de Santa Inés*, naming it after a historic battle from the Federal Wars in the nineteenth century when the Federalist forces defeated the conservative oligarchs following a brilliant tactical retreat. The acceptance of the CNE's decision was a replay of that retreat, and the people would again triumph over the conspiring forces of the opposition. Chávez recited passages from *Florentino y el Diablo*, a Venezuelan folk ballad in which a cowboy named Florentino is challenged to a singing duel with the Devil; Florentino courageously accepts the challenge and eventually defeats the Devil through his perseverance and wit. Chávez asserted that the coup-mongering leaders of the opposition were the Devil, and behind them was the biggest devil of all, George W. Bush. The government of the United States was “the black hat, the black horse, and the black banner, the real planner and driving force of all these movements that have attacked us.” Florentino – Chávez and the people – would answer their challenge and win.

The response to Chávez's call was extraordinary. During the next two weeks, Chávez passed over his regular party apparatus that had been losing popular support and created a new campaign organization, the Maisanta Command, led by key figures in the government. The command was named for a guerrilla fighter from the turn of the nineteenth century who was purportedly a grandfather of Chávez and one of his personal heroes. The Command organized a separate grassroots structure of over 8,000 precinct committees known as Electoral Battle Units (Unidad de Batalla Electoral, or UBE), many of them constituted by Bolivarian Circles that had organized during the previous three years. These committees coordinated the work of nearly 120,000 “electoral patrols” (*patrullas electorales*), each made up of approximately 10 voters, that sprouted from community organizations associated with the movement. Over the next two months the electoral patrols carried out neighborhood voter education and registration drives, posted campaign literature, organized rallies, and kept a scrupulous count of voters on election day. The campaign made massive use of print and electronic media campaigns built around a highly consistent set of slogans and images

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related to the themes of Santa Inés and *Florentino y el Diablo*. Banners and balloons labeled “NO” (a negative vote would retain Chávez) festooned highways, walls, and government buildings across Venezuela. The government’s advertisements repeatedly emphasized the successes of its new social programs and the purported ties of the opposition to the old party system and the Bush administration.

The opposition’s campaign was a pale shadow of the government’s, and it seemed to falter and lose its momentum from the start. Many in the opposition were lulled into a false sense of security by the success of the initial signature drive and early polls indicating low levels of approval for Chávez. Their umbrella organization, the Democratic Coordination (Coordinadora Democrática, or CD), failed to offer a clear program for policy change or select a replacement candidate (if successful, the recall would require a new open election), thereby fueling uncertainty about their unity and their capacity to govern. They took weeks to choose their own campaign command, ultimately a committee of 13 heads of parties and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). And they failed to carry out any grassroots organizational effort, relying instead on television-style campaigning that belied their claims to popular support. As the election approached, their own polls indicated that support for the recall was slipping and that Chávez was gaining ground among undecided voters.

By election day, the turnaround for Chávez and his movement was complete. Nearly 10 million Venezuelans cast their vote, an extraordinary 50 percent increase in turnout from the presidential elections of 2000. Chávez scored a resounding victory, with 5.8 million votes (59 percent) to the opposition’s 4 million (41 percent). He and his movement would remain in power until at least 2006.

This account of the recall election of 2004 raises several questions that are often voiced about “Chavismo,” or Chávez and the movement that supports him in Venezuela. Let us consider just a few of them.

First, in the recall campaign and especially in the two years that led up to it, we see the polarization of an electorate in what was once regarded as one of the most stable representative democracies in Latin America. From 1958 to 1998, Venezuela had a peculiar democratic regime known as the Punto Fijo system, named for a pact signed by key political actors during the democratic transition of 1958. This pact committed all parties to respect the outcome of subsequent national elections while implementing a set of redistributive economic development policies fed by the nation’s oil wealth. Although the system that emerged was characterized by the predominance of a few hierarchical, disciplined parties that largely monopolized access to oil rents, it enjoyed a high level of peaceful electoral competition and regular turnover that made Venezuela an apparent model of democracy. The country was a striking contrast with other nations in Latin America that experienced electoral fraud and violence, polarization between parties of the right and left, and periods of

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military rule (Blank 1973; Levine 1973, 1989; Martz and Myers 1977; Merkl 1981, 127–8; O'Donnell 1992, 37; Kornblith and Levine 1995).

With the rise of Chavismo this exceptionalism ended. Venezuela was transformed into a polarized party system with two camps that saw each other as enemies in a cosmic struggle. The opposition made frequent recourse to nonelectoral means to challenge Chávez, while the government chiseled away at the civil liberties of its opponents and openly used public resources to win elections. Many political institutions that previously had some shred of autonomy (or at least offered proportional representation to the different parties) were turned into organizations allied with Chávez's views that frequently excluded or ruled against the interests of the opposition. Yet, throughout this conflict, both sides continued to frame their goals and tactics in terms of democratic principles, and they ultimately hewed to minimal procedural standards that gave elections a degree of democratic legitimacy. What explains this “unraveling” of pluralistic norms and institutions, especially in a country such as Venezuela, where they seemed so firmly entrenched (McCoy and Myers 2004)?

Second, we cannot help but be impressed by the mobilizational capacity of Chavismo. In a matter of two weeks, the government was able to call out and organize as many as 1.2 million activists for its recall campaign. Even if the government's estimates of campaign organization were inflated, the number of grassroots activists was clearly much higher than that of the opposition. What impresses us is not just the number of activists, but also their dedication and willingness to set aside competing goals in order to support Chávez. What explains this extraordinary capacity for mobilization and organization?

Third, of course, the recall campaign raises the issue of Chávez's international ambitions and his growing conflict with the United States. This is most evident in his rhetoric linking the opposition with Bush and the purported efforts of the United States to extend its capitalist imperialism. Already by 2004, Chavismo had become part of a broader international conflict involving other Latin American and world leaders in a kind of anti-liberal-democratic front. In large measure, Chávez had acquired Fidel Castro's mantle of authority as leader of the radical left in Latin America. What fueled the animosity of Chávez and his allies toward the United States and capitalism?

Finally, we encounter Chávez's extraordinary, inflammatory rhetoric. Although made particularly famous for English speakers in his 2005 speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly comparing Bush with the Devil, his discourse emerges here with its demonization of the opposition and its exaltation of the government's project as the embodiment of the popular will. His words evoke comparison with the Manichaean discourse of other historic leaders – Juan Perón's famous 1946 campaign speech proclaiming the “liberation” of the Argentine people and urging them to choose “either Braden or Perón” (Perón n.d., 60), Getúlio Vargas's depiction in Brazil of the choice between “the nation's existence and the situation of chaos,” or Arturo Alessandri's warnings that the options in Chile were “either Alessandri as

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President or the Revolution” (Drake 1999, 65). Is this rhetoric erratic and irrelevant – window dressing for opportunistic leaders with authoritarian ambitions – or something more consistent and significant for understanding the movement?

Together these questions highlight the fact that Chávez and his movement represent an extraordinary transformation of Venezuela’s political system with ramifications for the entire region, if not beyond. For some scholars and policymakers, Chavismo is the greatest threat to representative democracy in the region and the greatest challenge to U.S. interests in Latin America since the end of the cold war (Noriega 2007); for others, Chavismo embodies hope for social justice and an end to the legacy of colonialism in Latin America and the rest of the developing world (Dossani and Chomski 2007). Yet, most of us are still a little unsure of what exactly the movement *is*. Is Chávez merely another military caudillo or a democratic revolutionary? Is his movement the product of a yearning for democracy, a reaction to economic policy failure, or an inevitable response to the challenges of globalization in an oil-based economy? Is his government reproducing old patterns of clientelism and top-down forms of political organization or opening society to participatory forms of democracy? In short, how should Chavismo be *categorized*, what is *causing* it, and what are its *consequences* for Venezuela and the region? The immediate purpose of this book is to answer these three overarching questions.

The main argument of this book is that Chavismo and many of its allied movements in other countries are best understood as instances of “populism.” This is a controversial word to use in Venezuela and in much of Latin America, not to mention among social scientists. By “populist,” I do not mean that Chávez and his movement are demagogic, that they have shortsighted economic policies, or that they represent a particular step along the convoluted path to modernization – although Chavismo and its allies may be all of those things. Instead, I mean that they have a distinct set of political *ideas*. Populism is a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political world – a worldview or, to use a more rarified term, a “discourse” – that perceives history as a Manichean struggle between Good and Evil, one in which the side of the Good is “the will of the people,” or the natural, common interest of the citizens once they are allowed to form their own opinions, while the side of Evil is a conspiring elite that has subverted this will. Wholesale institutional change – “revolution” or “liberation,” although rarely full-blown social revolution – is required in order to restore the will of the people; procedural rights (especially those of the opposition) may be treated as secondary concerns or instruments. All of these ideas are expressed in a characteristic language identifiable not through a particular lexicon, but through such diffuse elements as tone, metaphor, and theme.

Populism is not entirely undemocratic. Chávez and his supporters see sovereignty resting in ordinary human beings and argue for the expression of their will through elections and other mechanisms of direct participatory democracy. But populism is not *pluralist*. Dissent is not regarded as a valued, permanent

feature of politics, especially if it means disagreement with the goals of the revolution or the authority of Chávez. Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of Chavismo and other populist movements: their ability to use democratic ideals to question fundamental democratic practices. Populism represents one end of a normative dimension of politics that partially cuts across traditional procedural definitions of democracy in Venezuela and other countries. This dimension captures the political intentions of leaders and activists and helps us predict the direction in which they are likely to take their regimes.

Many scholars, journalists, and policymakers use the word populist to describe Chávez and his movement, not to mention the other historical instances to which I have compared them. In my review of about 40 academic journal articles published between 2000 and 2006 that study Chávez, I found that about half also use the word populist or populism. But none of these observers really clarify the meaning of this term or why it applies to Chávez, and they ultimately fail to say what it reveals about the unique causes and consequences of Chavismo, let alone how these relate to similar movements in Latin America or the rest of the globe. I argue that populism in the ideational sense allows us to answer all three of my research questions and sheds light on movements in other countries.

In terms of *categorization*, subsequent chapters demonstrate that the concepts of populist worldview or discourse neatly capture Chávez and his movement, as well as a few other historical and current regimes that are frequently considered populist. Chavismo is a paradigmatic populist movement whose leader and many of its followers share an antagonistic outlook that divides and polarizes Venezuelan society. Populism, moreover, is a much deeper and more consistent attribute of Chavismo than is the movement's increasingly leftist ideology. Chávez's leftist rhetoric of "twenty-first century socialism" has clearly become an important characteristic of the movement in the past few years, one that affects decisions about policy and organization as well as the kind of allies and enemies it creates at home and abroad. Yet, the movement's Manichaeian discourse was present much earlier – from the very moment that Chávez and his allies emerged on the political stage – and it has remained a surprisingly strong feature up to the present.

Seeing populism as a set of ideas also helps us identify Chavismo's *causes*. Populist movements such as Chavismo are not merely the product of economic crisis, globalization, or growing demands for participatory democracy, although these factors often contribute. Rather, populist movements become successful when there is a widespread failure of government to implement rights of citizenship, particularly the rule of law, that allows citizens to characterize their governments as *corrupt*. Venezuela experienced just such a failure after the oil boom of the 1970s. Not only did traditional politicians and their parties prove incapable of preserving economic growth and equity once oil revenues declined, but they displayed gross moral weakness in repeated scandals and halfhearted attempts to punish dishonest politicians. The message of populists like Chávez is an appealing normative response to these

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kinds of political failures. It frames them as part of a cosmic struggle of an idealized people against their elite oppressors and gives new meaning to democratic politics and dignity to ordinary citizens. Yet, populist movements typically prove incapable of solving these underlying problems. This is because they disdain the institutional formalities and impartial bureaucracies that the rule of law requires, a pattern we see repeated in Chavismo today. Hence, populism is a recurrent problem in developing regions such as Latin America, which manifest weak property rights and high levels of corruption, while it is largely absent or relegated to the fringes of politics in advanced industrial democracies.

Finally, defining populism in ideational terms helps us better identify and appreciate the *consequences* of Chavismo. The discourse of populist movements is indeed more than rhetorical window dressing; it reflects an underlying worldview that shapes the choices of leaders and followers as they organize themselves and implement policies. Most populists sincerely believe in the virtues of folk wisdom and direct, spontaneous expressions of the popular will, and they fear the corrupting influence of professional political organization. Hence, Chavismo has tended to remain a movement rather than a single hierarchical organization, and efforts to impose unified organizational structures have prompted schisms and fierce debate among movement activists. Chavistas sometimes struggle to reconcile their reverence for the charismatic leader with their belief in popular empowerment and autonomy. Yet, populists also feel a powerful need to demonstrate popular approval and counter what they regard as a sinister, illegitimate opposition. Partly because of this belief, the Chávez government has implemented major social policies with an idiosyncratic partisan logic that often works at cross-purposes with purely electoral goals. In allocating discretionary resources, for example, the government often fails to exploit opportunities to create a patronage machine or engage in open vote-buying, and it creates programs whose rhetoric actually drives away some undecided voters.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As should be evident, this is an argument with much broader implications than just an understanding of Chavismo and Venezuela. Each of the three specific research questions – categorizing Chavismo, explaining its causes, and understanding its consequences – requires that we address three similar areas of inquiry in the subfield of populism studies. And each of these, in turn, touches on general theoretical questions from the field of political science concerning the role of ideas in political behavior. In all of these areas, we will see that defining populism as a worldview or discourse adds to our understanding and points us to dimensions of politics that are often overlooked and poorly understood.

The first and most significant contribution to the broader scholarly literature is conceptual and empirical: not only to specify a particular ideational

definition of populism, but to defend it on logical grounds as a superior, minimal definition of the concept, and to defend it in practical terms by showing how it plays out across countries and across time. The study of populism is fairly old but lacks consensus on basic issues of definition and operationalization. Even with the definition of populism championed here, few scholars have tried to measure populist discourse to see if it really exists, especially in any kind of comparative context (c.f. Armony and Armony 2005; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). I demonstrate the power of this definition by showing how it encapsulates well-known structuralist, economic, and political-institutional alternatives. These other definitions describe significant causes and consequences of populist beliefs and discourse, such as movement organization and shortsighted macroeconomic policies, but the attributes they describe are logical corollaries of the worldview rather than populism's defining characteristics. By placing ideas at the center of populism, we can better understand the causal mechanisms that link these other phenomena together while identifying populism's overlooked aspects.

I also demonstrate the practicality and robustness of the ideational definition through a novel effort at measurement. After applying traditional qualitative discourse analysis to the case of Chavismo, I use a quantitative technique from educational psychology known as holistic grading to analyze a much larger sample of leaders. This technique uses whole-text analysis of political speeches and turns out to have both high validity and good reliability. The resulting dataset reveals the existence of a populist discourse across different periods of time and in multiple countries and languages, and it demonstrates that populist discourse is a reasonably coherent and consistent phenomenon that can be measured scientifically.

The second contribution of this book is a better explanation for what causes populism. That is, what causes populist movements to emerge successfully at certain times and in certain places? Over the years scholars have suggested several explanations, including economic crisis, disjunctures of modernization, and dependent development, yet none of these have been tested simultaneously or with any kind of quantitative analysis. I show that all of these theories fail to get at the heart of populism because they ignore its normative underpinnings. As a discourse or worldview, populism is ultimately a way of interpreting the moral basis or legitimacy of a political system, and it makes the most sense to politicians and citizens when there is widespread violation of democratic norms, especially the rule of law – as there was in Venezuela in the late 1990s and as there is today in many other developing countries. Severe policy crises alone can reduce support for incumbents, but they cannot undermine support for constitutional orders unless they are plausibly linked to a systematic abuse of public office that can be characterized as corruption. Charismatic leaders provide essential catalysts for organizing successful populist movements (as I put it later, they help determine the supply of populism), but they have to give the right message in order to mobilize voter demands effectively. While a few discourse analysts have made similar causal

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arguments (de la Torre 2000), they have traditionally been reluctant to test these theories, let alone rely on cross-national empirics or quantitative data. For that matter, few studies of populism using any other definition have been willing to do so either. I test my theory against extant ones by looking at the particular case of Chavismo, where I use individual-level data and trace out causal mechanisms; and by looking broadly across countries, where I gauge aggregate patterns with a moderately sized dataset. This analysis validates the normative theory of populist movements while finding that more traditional theories lack predictive power.

The final contribution to the broader literature is a set of theories on the consequences of populism, in particular its consequences for organization and policy behavior. These are subjects that receive relatively little attention from scholars studying populism. In the case of political organization, I present a more comprehensive set of attributes that goes beyond the qualities emphasized in political-institutional definitions by tying populism to the phenomenon of social movements. One of the implications of this study is that social movements in the classical sense, and the related concept of “contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), derive as much from the worldview of movement participants as they do from participants’ resource constraints. Movement organization embodies populists’ advocacy of direct democracy and the virtues of ordinary citizens. Populists organize as a movement because they want to, not merely because they have to.

In the case of policy behavior, I examine theories of discretionary spending and poverty alleviation programs to show that broad choices over policy – such as how program resources will be allocated, and whether they will emphasize radical redistribution or the protection of property rights – are contingent on the outlook of the politicians and their socioeconomic context. The kinds of partisan discretionary spending programs we often associate with populist leaders are not accidental by-products of weak institutions, but consequences of a perspective that seeks a popular movement for revolutionary change. Populists and their followers want these kinds of policies and see them as evidence of the movement’s power and intentions. Purely rational perspectives on political behavior that assume vote- or office-maximizing elites all too often ignore these underlying normative dimensions and thus much of what makes these spending programs so interesting and problematic.

Beyond these three contributions to the populism literature is a much more fundamental contribution to political science. This is the attempt to forge a more positivist approach to the study of “intersubjective,” “thick,” or “anthropological” notions of culture. This is more than just another reaffirmation of the idea that culture matters. Over the past decade or two, scholars have responded to the dominance of rational choice theory by engaging in a number of studies of the role of ideas in political behavior. Drawing heavily on the pioneering work of Weber (1958 [1946]) and Durkheim (1984), they urge us to consider the role that beliefs and motivations outside of our raw material self-interest play in our decisions. However, this rather broad effort breaks down

into warring disciplinary camps that often seem irreconcilable. On one side are postmodernists, discourse theorists, and constructivists who see ideas as socially constructed and inextricably linked to language (Wendt 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2004; van Dijk 2008); for these scholars, our shared language exerts an almost insidious influence on our thoughts and all too frequently serves as a justification for traditional social and international relations that are unethical or unjust. On the other side are rationalists or behavioralists. They agree that ideas play an independent causal role in human behavior, but they argue that human beings exercise considerable intentionality in creating their ideas, and that the objective material world strongly conditions what ideas are ultimately accepted and acted on (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

When we study populism, we are forced to consider both approaches to the role of ideas. This is because populism captures a different level of ideas than is usually the subject of recent research. Populism is not a set of principled beliefs such as our current system of human rights norms, nor is it a set of causal beliefs such as Keynesianism or neoclassical economics, both of which are conceptualized as relatively apparent aspects of culture capturing highly articulated sets of ideas (Hall 1989; Goldstein 1993; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Populism is a deeper aspect of culture that reflects basic, interrelated beliefs about history, the nature of self and the community, and the metaphysical. It is a worldview and is expressed as a discourse.

For behavioralists especially this is unfamiliar terrain. While several studies acknowledge the existence of worldview as a level of ideas capturing our deepest assumptions about how the political world works, they leave this level largely unexamined and instead focus on specific sets of norms, ideologies, and scientific theories. Worldviews and the thick sets of ideas that they represent are all too often treated as an unchanging background that we can largely take for granted. In the few instances where they are discussed at all, there is no real attempt to categorize or measure them (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Berman 1998). Ironically, for better guidance we must turn to the constructivists and discourse theorists who have given much more attention to these underlying sets of ideas, including especially those who study populist discourse (de la Torre 2000; Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005b). Their work here is much more advanced and provides most of the descriptive material we need to create a better definition and measurement of populism. They also provide a crucial methodological insight that the behavioralists or rationalists miss: the close link between ideas and language at this deep level. While ideologies and rhetoric may be easily separable, thought and language become almost indistinguishable when we begin to examine deeply held, unarticulated assumptions about politics. For many purposes we must treat these two concepts – worldview and discourse – as synonyms. This should not be taken as a strong endorsement of the constructivist position that our shared language is the principal cause of our ideas. Constructivists and discourse theorists too often assume what needs to be tested, namely, the dominance of language over thought and behavior. In the study of populism, I find commonalities across