Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective

Populism is best understood as a Manichaean worldview linked to a characteristic language or discourse. Chavismo, the movement that sustains Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, is a paradigmatic instance of populism. Using a novel cross-country dataset on populist discourse, combined with extensive data from within Venezuela and across other countries, this book demonstrates that populist movements can be understood as responses to widespread corruption and economic crisis. The book analyzes the Bolivarian Circles and government missions in Venezuela, revealing how populist ideas influence political organization and policy. The analysis provides important insight into the nature of populism, including its causes and consequences, and addresses broader questions about the role of ideas in politics.

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This book was born out of the last stages of my dissertation research nearly 10 years ago. I first traveled to Venezuela in 1999 to study why the traditional system of political parties had broken down. For several months I interviewed former party leaders and scholars of traditional Venezuelan politics, a process that gradually educated me in the history and workings of the old Punto Fijo system. However, as I worked, it became clear that something new and important was taking shape in Venezuela, something that very few academics were studying yet. This was the movement led by Hugo Chávez, or “Chavismo,” which was taking the place of the old party system.

Seeing Chavismo as the real story was my first step in a process of discovery; the second step came when I began to understand the distinct qualities of Chavismo as a populist movement. My academic training is in the “new institutionalism,” meaning that I study the causes and consequences of formal rules and political organization, particularly political parties, using rational-choice theory. Hence, when my first interviews of Chavista leaders took place in December 1999, I focused on the leadership of what was then the movement’s official party, Movimiento V República or MVR. My attempts to analyze Chavismo were essentially descriptions of MVR’s organization and ideology. However, in early 2003, a colleague invited me to present a conference paper discussing Chavismo as an example of populism. This was an unfamiliar concept to me, and as I explored this academic literature, I was introduced to a set of ideas that gave me extraordinary understanding of what was happening in Venezuela. I began to see that Chavismo went well beyond the confines of MVR and that most of the action was taking place outside the party. This was a populist movement, and the party played only a minor role in the larger workings of this different kind of organization.

I also began to see the potential for studying the concept of populism, one that has been particularly vexing for social scientists. By treating populism as a discourse or worldview – as a set of fundamental beliefs subconsciously expressed and shaped by language – I could understand how Chavismo had transformed Venezuelan politics, what had given rise to the movement, and
what its implications were for politicians and policymakers. It also seemed
to challenge or at least elucidate the dominant rational-choice approach to
political science that my colleagues and I used, highlighting an additional set
of ideas or meanings that were essential for understanding political behavior.
But the concept needed clarification and had never been quantitatively mea-
sured or treated in significant comparative perspective. I decided to write a
book about Chavismo and populism that would allow me to do this.

Most of the data in this book have been collected since then. In June–July
2004, just prior to the presidential recall election, my students and I con-
ducted the survey of members of Bolivarian Circles found here in Chapter 6.
The data on the government’s social programs (Chapter 7) were collected dur-
ing July 2005. In spring and summer 2006 I conducted the cross-national
analysis of populist discourse that provides much of the comparative data in
this book. Finally, in August–September 2007 I cooperated with the Latin
American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University in conducting the
first version of the AmericasBarometer in that country, a source of some of the
data found here in Chapter 7 on the government’s social programs and later
in the Conclusion.

The recent emergence of other populist movements in Latin America that
are strongly linked to Chavismo (including the one led by Evo Morales and
the indigenous Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia, and the PAIS Alliance of
Rafael Correa in Ecuador) makes my earlier decision seem prescient. Populism
is becoming a catchphrase again among academics, policymakers, and jour-
nalists. However, much of the old conceptual confusion still prevails, and
the potential for the discursive concept of populism to enhance our scientific
understanding of politics – not just in Latin America or developing countries,
but in the advanced industrial democracies as well – is largely unrealized. I
hope this book will shed light on these other movements and provide a tem-
plate for expanded approaches to the study of political institutions and ideas.
Acknowledgments

Portions of this book have been published elsewhere, and I wish to acknowledge these institutions for providing copyright permission to reproduce some of the data here. A Spanish-language version of Chapter 5 was published in a volume edited by Carlos de la Torre and Enrique Peruzzotti (El retorno del pueblo: Populismo y nuevas democracias en América Latina. Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO). Portions of this same chapter were published in an article in Latin American Research Review that I coauthored with David Hansen, one of my undergraduate students and now a graduate student in economics at Stanford University. And the cross-national analysis of populist discourse in Chapter 3 was published in Comparative Political Studies.

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