

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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Preface

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 measured 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 conducted the survey of members of Bolivarian Circles found here in Chapter 6. The data on the government's social programs (Chapter 7) were collected during 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 journalists. 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 template 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*.

I give special thanks to Kurt Weyland, who invited me to participate in that crucial conference panel of 2003. He provided additional comments on other parts of this book, especially the cross-national description in Chapter 3. My gratitude also goes to Dan Hellinger for suggesting that I study Chavismo at the grassroots level, advice that led to my study of the Bolivarian Circles. He provided ongoing support for other phases of the research, particularly the study of the Missions, and his compelling criticisms forced me to temper some of my early thinking about populism. María Pilar García-Guadilla of the Universidad de Simón Bolívar in Venezuela provided advice and material assistance for the studies of the Circles and social programs, and her criticisms of my initial findings regarding the Circles helped me reformulate the version seen here. Her students were some of my best sources in Venezuela, especially Ana Maldonado. Special thanks also to Jennifer McCoy for comments on early drafts of the Circles and Missions studies. Ken Roberts read an early draft of the analysis of Venezuela's party system breakdown in Chapter 4. David Smilde provided comments on multiple portions of this manuscript while convincing me that there was a need for additional scholarly work on Chavismo. David Hansen, coauthor of the original study of the Bolivarian Circles, looked over the draft of Chapter 6 and gave his permission to reproduce much of our original data. And two anonymous reviewers made suggestions that greatly

improved the manuscript; my sincere thanks to them for giving it such a careful reading.

Many of my colleagues at Brigham Young University (BYU) have looked over portions of this book or given feedback on the original prospectus, as well as tremendous encouragement during my early years as an academic. These include Ray Christensen, Scott Cooper, Jay Goodliffe, Darren Hawkins, Wade Jacoby, Quin Monson, Dan Nielson, and Ken Stiles. I am extremely grateful for their patience. And, of course, my deepest gratitude is to my wife, Eliza, who looked over several versions of the entire manuscript. Her work made it possible for this book to be written, and I consider it her book as much as mine. Our young children, Andrew, Edward, and Lucy, were very patient with me when I had to spend evenings and some weekends away from them. I hope they will be proud of the results.

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