

## The Many Faces of Populism in Latin America

Populism is a term that has frequently been used to describe a number of different ways of governing, and the usage has been especially popular when looking at the governance of Latin American countries. In order to judge whether or not populist politics are actually a viable form of governing, it is necessary to discuss what, in fact, populism really is. Many scholars in the field of political science have different theories of what populism entails, and some of the most comprehensive ones come from Kenneth M. Roberts and Margaret Canovan. Each of these authors offers not only a working definition of populism, but also how populist politics is a function (or dysfunction) of democracy. They also offer their views on the term neo populism and what distinguishes this from the classical form of populism that had emerged in past years in Latin American countries. This essay is going to discuss the different (and sometimes similar) contributions that Roberts and Canovan have had to understanding what exactly populism is, what the underlying factors were of the rise and decline of populism in Latin America, what neo populism means, and why understanding populism and neo populism is fundamental to understanding how democracy works in this region.

The first author to be examined here is Roberts. This author offers the definition of populism as, “the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined *pueblo*, or ‘the people’” (Roberts, p. 5-6). The key element of this working definition is the emphasis on which methods the charismatic leader utilizes in order to garner the support of the majority of the constituency. By defining populism in this way, Roberts is able to touch upon two very important concepts. The first concept is that the way in which populist leaders mobilize the support of their constituency is not set in stone, especially in terms of economic strategies. The economic rewards that some

populist leaders use may include higher wages or industrialization that is primarily led by the state. However, some populist leaders may opt to not use these kinds of material incentives and benefits, and instead appeal to psychological and ideological interests. These kinds of leaders could incite mass mobilization by reinforcing nationalist ideologies or a class-based kind of mobilization that rebels against the social structure that supports a small class of elites (Roberts, p. 6-7). Therefore, leaders that employ populist measures have an array of methods to choose from in order to mobilize the masses and gain their support. This “tool kit” of populism is one of the reasons that many populist movements do not have an ideological definition that helps to serve as an umbrella under which their actions lie (Roberts, p. 7).

The second concept that Roberts touches upon with his definition of populism is that populist leaders use a top-down form of political mobilization, but they often neglect to create institutions that help to control this effort at mobilization. Therefore, just as with economic or ideological incentives, there is no one way to create (or not create) institutions that would manage and organize the mobilization efforts of populist leaders. For some leaders, such as Perón in Argentina, the organization of civil society takes first place among priorities, and other leaders, such as Fujimori in Peru, depend on having a very personal and accessible relationship with their constituencies and do not have any intermediary organizations available (Roberts, p. 7-8).

Roberts describes the rise and fall of populism in Latin America as “waves” (Roberts, p. 4). These waves have occurred at two separate times within this region, both of which were “critical junctures”, or when the economies of Latin American countries were changing (Roberts, p. 4). The first transition that marked a wave of populism was after 1930, during the conversion from rule by an oligarchy and an economy based on exports to politics that included the masses

(especially the working and lower classes) and an economy that was led by an industrialization that was controlled and owned by the state. The second wave of populism occurred after the 1982 debt crisis. This economic crisis let neo populist figures step into leadership positions in order to appear to the disorganized masses as a way out of their economic situation.

Now that Roberts's definition of populism and its rise and decline in Latin America has been discussed, it is important to move on to look at what he has to offer to the understanding of neo populism. Roberts never explicitly mentions the word neo populism, but he does offer a look into a new wave, or the "second great wave of populist mobilization [which began] at the tail end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Roberts, p. 11). According to Roberts, neo populism began as a response to the feeling of anonymity from the party system that began to occur in many countries within the region. There was a lack of political representation which offered outside figures with populist campaigns the chance to step into the political arena and offer the masses what the parties would not: Representation. Roberts presents the idea that neo populism is basically just a resurging populism that is occurring as a reaction to neo liberal economic policies. Neo populist leaders sometimes choose to combine the populist leadership styles with neo liberal policies. These leaders include Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Fernando Collor in Brazil (Roberts, p. 4). Also, with the examples of Chavez in Venezuela and Ollanta Humala in Peru, this author shows that the classical form of populist politics is still utilized by leaders today (Roberts, p. 17).

With the definitions of populism and neo populism that Roberts has given, it is now possible to look at how the understanding of these two concepts is integral to comprehending how democracy functions (or does not) in Latin America. For populist and neo populist leaders, the degeneration of institutions that represent the people is something that they can take

advantage of and attack verbally. They call parties and other representative institutions undemocratic and interested only in the welfare of elites and not the masses. In this way, populist leaders provide an alternative to the corrupt form of democracy that is administered by the institutions. Some, including Fujimori of Peru, give the impression that they are the way to practicing a true form of democracy, a “direct democracy” (Roberts, p. 14). However, the reality of direct democracy is that it provides the leader with the ability to surpass those institutions that would provide a form of checks and balances upon their leadership. This appeal to the masses of the promise of true democracy with no intermediary institutions is what populist leaders bring as a part of their political platform.

The second author, Canovan, has views that will now be discussed regarding populism, the underlying factors of the rise and decline of populist movements in Latin America, neo populism, and how understanding populism and neo populism contribute to understanding how democracy functions in this region. Canovan defines populism as “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” (Canovan, p. 3). Just as Roberts states, Canovan explains that the methods and values of a populist leader can vary depending on the economic and political context they are in. Also like Roberts’s piece, Canovan explicitly states that populist leaders are not simply part of a reaction against the existing institutions of power, but that they are specifically campaigning on behalf of the authority of the people. Leaders with populist tendencies appeal to usually one of three kinds of ‘the people’: The nation as a whole, an ethnic minority, or the common people who are usually shadowed by an elite class. Canovan elaborates more on the style of populist leaders than Roberts does, and says that they address their constituents with a simple and direct style that avoids the evasiveness given by other kinds of politicians (Canovan, p. 5). Populist leaders tend

to foster close personal ties with their followers, and inspire a sort of excitement that seems to be lacking with leaders who are connected to political parties.

In terms of noting the underlying factors of the rise and fall of populist regimes in Latin America, Canovan is not as specific as Roberts in saying exactly when these movements occurred. However, Canovan does agree with Roberts on the point that in times of economic hardship, democratic systems of governance are susceptible to populist reactions. She states that ever since the 1890s the populist reaction has occurred to an unsure democratic power (Canovan, p. 12). Due to the fact that populist leaders are able to take advantage of the weaknesses of democracy, this trend could continually occur into the future.

Neo populism, according to Canovan, was not specifically defined as such, but could be seen in the shift of populism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1940s, there was a shift from Left to Right in populism. This meant that the original populism was a Leftist ideology that was fairly radical and the new populism, or neo populism, was an ideology that created an enmity between ‘the people’ and the new liberal elite (Canovan, p. 4). However, both populism and neo populism involved charismatic leaders who were intent on mobilizing the masses whose interests were underrepresented by the existing power structures.

Canovan presents an interesting idea of how populism and democracy are intertwined, and therefore how it is impossible to have one without the other. The difference between how these two ways of governing are represented in the United States as opposed to in Latin America lies in how firmly institutions are in place to prevent populist tendencies from overrunning democratic principles. According to Canovan, there are two sides of democracy, which are the redemptive side and the pragmatic side. The redemptive side of democracy is “the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people” (Canovan, p. 11). The pragmatic side of

democracy includes “the multi-party systems, free elections, pressure groups, lobbying and institutions” (Canovan, p. 11). These two sides must intertwine so that democracy does not just become an institutionalized ritual that has no redemptive qualities to it and also so that it does not dissolve into pure populism with no institutional control over the actions of the executive. In this way, populism is a natural occurrence with the onset of democracy, but it is in how balanced the two sides of democracy are that the different kinds of governance can be seen.

With the views and theories purported by Canovan and Roberts, the similarities and differences can be seen between their definitions of populism, their descriptions of the factors underlying the rise and fall of this governing style, their definitions of neo populism, and the way they see the relevance of populism and neo populism for understanding how democracy functions in Latin America. While populism has historically been considered to be an assault on democracy, it can also be seen as a necessary component of a democratic governing style. Therefore, there must be at least a little bit of populism for democracy to work in the way that it should, instead of dissolving from pressure by leaders with populist agendas.

### Works Cited

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