Populism’s Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the U.S.

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Web Appendix: Cases, Measures, and Scores in Table 1

Focus on Latin America and Europe

Like the whole article, table 1 focuses on Latin America and Europe, for two main reasons. First, those two regions are most similar to the U.S. and can thus suggest the most instructive and valid inferences about the prospects of U.S. democracy under populist Trump. Second, populist chief executives have been most common in those two regions, each of which also shares a much broader range of background conditions than heterogeneous Asia (cf. Kenny forthcoming: appendix A). Therefore, by the logic of “most similar systems” designs, Latin America and Europe allow for a systematic analysis of the conditions under which populist leaders suffocate democracy. An analysis of populism in Asia, for instance, would be hampered by the particularities of different country cases.

As regards the time frame of the analysis, I focus on the last four decades, after a serious older threat to populist leadership in Latin America, namely military coups, has become rare. This recent focus enhances comparability with European experiences and, above all, allows for more relevant inferences on the U.S. case, where military coups are out of the question.

Populism

Despite the continuing definitional disagreements (see, e.g., Mudde 2017; Weyland 2017), there is considerable agreement on the actual cases of populism in empirical studies (e.g., Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). Thus, dissensus on the concept’s intension has not hindered a reasonable degree of consensus on its extension. A recent empirical analysis of populism has therefore proposed a “’working list’ of broadly consensual cases” (Weyland and Madrid 2019: 9). The present investigation crosschecks and complements this working list with published listings by other authors, namely Doyle (2011: 1455-57), Hawkins and Castanho (2019: 34, 45-48), and Kenny (forthcoming: appendix A). Despite some differences in classification, I have also consulted the “populist speech data” produced by Team Populism, which employs an ideational definition of populism by contrast to the political-strategic definition used in this article <https://populism.byu.edu/Pages/Data, accessed July 18, 2019>.

The analysis deliberately includes borderline cases such as Evo Morales (cf. Weyland and Madrid 2019: 9, n.7) in order to avoid the impression of “cherry-picking” cases that fit the article’s main arguments. Note that the inclusion or exclusion of these cases does not affect the findings of the analysis. For instance, Morales is just one of three cases of “Bolivarian” populists who suffocated democracy in polities of high instability that benefitted from huge hydrocarbon windfalls.

My own concept of populism, developed in Weyland (2001) and presented again in Weyland (2017), is very similar to Körösényi’s (2019) “plebiscitary leadership.” I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this interesting article.

Institutional Weakness

Institutional weakness is exceedingly difficult to measure, as the recent analysis by Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo (2018: 51-64) highlights, which does not score, rank or classify Latin American cases.

My analysis classifies as cases of high instability (HIN) those countries that have experienced two irregular ousters of presidents in the five years preceding the electoral victory of a populist leader (Bolivia: 2003 and 2005), or three such ousters or dangerous challenges via major coup attempts during a ten-year time frame (Ecuador: 1997, 2000, 2005; and Venezuela: 1992, 1992, 1993).

Susceptibility to para-legal change (PCH) (for instance, via arrogated decree powers, pressure on courts, etc.) prevailed before the election of populist chief executives in those Latin American countries that lack firm, consolidated institutions, that is, all nations in the region except Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay. Note that this classification corresponds to the measurement of “democratic governance,” a related albeit different concept, in Mainwaring, Scully, and Vargas Cullell (2010: 18, 39). According to the country studies of Ganev (2018) and Dragoman (2013), susceptibility to para-legal change problem also prevailed in Bulgaria and Romania.

Comparatively easy changeability (ECH) characterized parliamentary systems (especially those with unicameral parliaments such as Hungary) as well as semi-presidential systems in which presidents command weak, limited attributions and powers, such as Poland, which Tworzecki (2019: 115, n.4) actually classifies as a parliamentary system.

Exogenous Conjunctural Opportunities

Economic crisis (ECR) is operationalized as inflation above 50% per month or a GDP drop worse than minus 5% per year, during the year preceding the election of a populist chief executive.

A security crisis (SCR) consists of an armed challenge by more than 5,000 insurgents.

Hydrocarbon windfalls (HWI) occur when countries earn revenues from fossil fuel exports that amount to more than 15% of GDP per year, based on the data provided by Fernández and Villar (2014: 14-20).

A study suggested by an anonymous reviewer (Hungary. Ministry of the National Economy 2016) examines whether EU subsidies expose East European countries to the resource curse. But this analysis shows (p. 4) that EU subsidies constitute an infinitely smaller share of GDP and export revenues than oil does in major producers such as Venezuela (3.2% of GDP in Hungary vs. 25% of GDP in Venezuela, p. 5). Moreover, EU funds carry some conditionality and are subject to monitoring (p. 5) – which was not the case with the flood of petrodollars falling into Chávez’s lap. For these reasons, EU subsidies do not provide exogenous opportunities of a magnitude that is nearly equivalent to hydrocarbon windfalls as operationalized above.

Note that the fracking boom plays a much smaller role in the U.S. economy than the hydrocarbon sector in Latin America’s “Bolivarian” countries; and in the market economy of the U.S., profits remain mostly in private rather than state hands.

List of Cases: Populist Chief Executives (in order of appearance in table 1)

Bolivarian Populism in Latin America

Hugo Chávez, Venezuela, 1999 – 2013

Evo Morales, Bolivia, 2006 – present

Rafael Correa, Ecuador, 2007 – 2017

Lenín Moreno, Ecuador, 2017 – present

Lucio Gutiérrez, Ecuador, 2013 – 2015

Manuel Zelaya, Honduras, 2006 – 2009

Fernando Lugo, Paraguay, 2008 – 2012

Ollanta Humala, Peru, 2011 – 2016

Néstor Kirchner, Argentina, 2003 – 2007

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina, 2007 – 2015

Álvaro Colom, Guatemala, 2008 – 2012

Neoliberal Populism in Latin America

Alberto Fujimori, Peru, 1990 – 2000

Álvaro Uribe, Colombia, 2002 – 2010

Carlos Menem, Argentina, 1989 – 1999

Alan García, Peru, 1985 – 1990

Alejandro Toledo, Peru, 2001 – 2006

Abdalá Bucaram, Ecuador, 1996 – 1997

Fernando Collor de Mello, Brazil, 1990 – 1992

Jorge Serrano, Guatemala, 1991 – 1993

Ethno-National Populism in Europe

Viktor Orbán, Hungary, 2010 – present

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey, 2002 – present

Silvio Berlusconi, Italy, 1994 – 1995, 2001 – 2006, 2008 – 2011

Vladimír Mečiar, Slovakia, 1994 – 1998

Robert Fico, Slovakia, 2006 – 2010, 2012 – 2018

Boyko Borisov, Bulgaria, 2009 – 2013, 2014 – 2017, 2017 – present

Miloš Zeman/Andrej Babiš, Czech Republic, 2013 – present

Traian Băsescu, Romania, 2004 – 2014

Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland, 2015 – present

Andreas Papandreou, Greece, 1981 – 1989, 1993 – 1996

Alexis Tsipras, Greece, 2015 – 2019

Notes on Specific Populist Chief Executives (in order of appearance in table 1)

Moreno in Ecuador (ECU) is not a populist but the handpicked successor of populist Rafael Correa. Yet as discussed in the text, this case is instructive to illustrate the impact of the resource curse.

García in Peru (PER), an outstanding populist leader, was not a neoliberal but is listed here to mark the contrast with his successor Fujimori. García’s second term, in which he was much less of an overbearing populist leader (2006 – 2011), would receive the same scores as his predecessor Alejandro Toledo and his successor Ollanta Humala.

Ecuador (ECU) under Bucaram did not yet suffer from high instability. The country only fell into this predicament after Bucaram’s strikingly para-legal ouster in 1997, when congress deposed him on charges of “mental incapacity” and then disrespected a constitutional court ruling in Bucaram’s favor.

In the Czech Republic, President Miloš Zeman has since his election as president in 2013 promoted ethno-nationalist populism. Moreover, Andrej Babiš has since his appointment as deputy prime minister and finance minister in 2014, and especially since his appointment as prime minister in 2017 pursued a technocratic populist course that in political terms has similarities with Hungary’s Orbán and Poland’s Kaczyński (Hanley and Vachudova 2020).

On Traian Băsescu in Romania and the impact of his populist leadership on democracy, see also Dragoman (2013).

Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland holds neither the premiership nor the presidency, but as a simple member of parliament is the effective power behind both thrones because he is the undisputed, omnipotent leader of his populist party. Poland “is best classified as having a parliamentary rather than a semi-presidential system” due to its nonexecutive presidency (Tworzecki 2019: 115, n.4). Since 2015, Polish democracy has suffered substantial deterioration especially due to the takeover of the judiciary by populist Kaczyński’s party, but even the highly concerned analysis of Sadurski (2018: 171-72, 175) still counts the country as democratic and not authoritarian. After all, there has been no serious skewing of the electoral arena nor harassment or pressure on the partisan opposition; and a strong civil and political society has offered strenuous resistance to populist efforts at power concentration.

Andreas Papandreou and Alexis Tsipras in Greece (GRE) are not cases of rightwing, ethno-national populism, but left-leaning populist leaders. They are listed here to provide a comprehensive analysis of populism in contemporary Europe. Tsipras won election after Greece had emerged from its acute economic crisis; GDP growth reached 0.7% in 2014 and “was expected [to accelerate to] 2.9 percent in 2015” (Pappas 2019: 226). Because in the absence of a crisis, the new prime minister’s movement-party lacked a parliamentary majority, his government rested on an ideologically incongruous coalition with a radical-right populist movement (Pappas 2019: 227).

Different Types of Populism

Similarly to the analysis summarized in table 1, Castanho’s (2019: 286-88) interesting investigation of populists’ electoral success with Ragin’s method finds that most cases (except Spain’s PODEMOS) cluster onto two paths, namely Latin America’s recent leftwing, “Bolivarian” populism and Europe’s predominantly rightwing populism (Castanho’s more recent time frame excludes Latin America’s neoliberal populism).

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