

Peronism and the Birth of Modern Populism*

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Latin America has been the breeding ground for a particular interpretation of democratic ideals: modern populism. While populism has been a constant feature of politics, the concept of modern populism refers to a historically delimited concept that arose at the beginning of what is generally referred to as “the second democratizing wave” (Huntington 1991). Modern populism represents a specific democratizing path that resulted in processes of social and political incorporation through an electoral regime that departed in significant ways from the liberal representative canon that was being promoted by the triumphal Allied Powers in the aftermath of the Second World War. Modern populism proposed an alternative path at democratic institutionalization from that of the liberal model. It arose at a particular historical juncture marked on the one hand, by the defeat of fascism and on the other hand, by the rise to prominence of the two regimes that would confront each other during the Cold War period: liberal democracy and communist dictatorship. Modern populism sought to position itself as a third way, one that could successfully promote the social and political incorporation of the

popular sectors. Modern populism then established itself as the foremost democratic challenger of liberal representative democracy. It is a presence that haunts representative politics, particularly in times of crisis.

The relevance of modern populism can be seen today as populism has extended well beyond the region where it was born. Populist movements are gaining traction in old and new democracies alike. A new generation of populist leaders have come to power in very different national settings and are committed to bring the ideal of populist democracy to life. From Venezuela to Hungary, populist administrations have engaged in processes of constitution-making and/or legislative reforms with the goal of re-founding democracy on a new basis. This article traces the genealogy of a model of democracy that arose in Latin America in the mid-1940s and that has attained significant momentum in today’s politics.

This article is organized as follows: section one presents a brief historical description of the rise and contours of classical Peronism in Argentina, section two describes the main tenets of the democratic model of modern populism through an analysis of some of the

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institutional transformations promoted by Peronism in government, and section three analyses the comeback of such a democratic model in contemporary politics, as well as the distinguishing trait that differentiates contemporary from classical expressions of populism.

I. Peronism and the creation of modern populism

The rise of Peronism in Argentina in the mid-1940s marked the birth of the modern model of populism. The most distinctive feature differentiating modern from previous expressions of populism was the former's rejection of dictatorial politics and its commitment to democratic institutions. Such commitment gives way to efforts at institutionalizing a particular form of democracy. The notion of modern populism consequently refers to a particular subtype of populism: to expressions of populism that have reached power and consequently are in a position to engage in processes of institutional transformation to establish a populist regime. The rise of Peronism in Argentina gave life to the first expression of a populist democratic regime. Such an experience would soon be followed by other Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. In all those cases, populist governments propelled processes of democratization that changed the institutional and social landscape of their respective societies. As a consequence, the populist period in Latin America are always associated with the transition from semi-democratic or authoritarian regimes to mass democracy (Germani 1971, Di Tella, Collier and Collier 1991).

Peronism stands out from the rest of the regional expressions of populism not only because it was the first one to establish the foundations of a populist democracy, but also due to the extent and lasting consequences of the changes that it promoted. The experience represented a turning point in Argentine

history and Peronism has since then remained the most influential electoral force in the country.

While Peronism has assumed many forms and identities and has governed Argentina in five periods: 1946-1955 (the first two presidential terms of Perón); 1973-1976 (Perón's third presidency, succeeded by vice president Isabel Perón after his death in 1974); 1989-1999 (Carlos Menem's two presidential terms); 2000-2003 (Eduardo Duhalde's interim administration); and 2003-2015 (the period that comprises a presidential term of Nestor Kirchner and the two subsequent periods of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner), the focus of the present analysis is on "the classical" and founding moment of Peronism: the regime that spanned from 1946, when Juan Domingo Perón was elected president of Argentina, to 1955, when Perón was removed from power by a military coup. During those years, Perón set up the foundations of a modern populist regime, establishing an institutional and political blueprint that has since haunted liberal representative regimes in Latin America, and more recently, worldwide. In an epoch where populism has made a comeback and converted itself into a global phenomenon, an analysis of the basis of modern populism can help us understand what is the nature of this enduring (and increasingly influential) understanding of democracy.

The phenomenon of Peronism is closely related to the person of Juan Domingo Perón, an army officer who broke into the Argentine political scene in the 1940s as an influential figure of the military regime that had been established on June 4, 1943. The military regime was the second such military experience since the country's attempt to promote a transition from oligarchical rule to mass democracy. The political regime established in 1860, which is generally referred as "the conservative order" (Botana 1977), inaugurated a new political stage of Argentine politics marked by the closing of the state and a regime building period. Yet, the era of political peace that the

oligarchical republican order instated was relatively short lived. Already by 1980, the political order was being questioned by a new political organization, The Radical Party (UCR), organized around the claim of free elections. Eventually, an electoral reform was passed in 1912, which resulted in the election of the Radical Party's leader, Hipólito Yrigoyen, to the presidency.

The election of Yrigoyen inaugurated a novel yet short-lived democratic experience: the democratic regime only lasted fourteen years, coming to a close in 1930, when a military coup removed Yrigoyen (who was then serving a second presidential term) from power. The episode not only truncated Argentina's first attempt at consolidating a mass democracy but initiated a half-century long period of institutional instability and military intervention in politics that would last until the 1983 election of Raul Alfonsín to the presidency.

Despite their intentions, the military authorities that took power in 1930 did not stay for very long. A return to civilian rule soon came, yet one that was marked by the tampering with electoral institutions to prevent the majoritarian Radical Party from returning to power. This period of fraudulent electoral politics came to an end in 1943 when a pro-fascist military intervention took power. The military government banned political parties, dissolved congress, intervened in provincial administrations, established press censorship, and imposed religious education on the public school system, while promoting a purge of communist and other "undesirable elements" from trade unions, universities, and the public administration. It is during this period that Colonel Perón made his entrance into the national political scene. Perón had been appointed to the National Labor and Welfare Department (which he later upgraded to a Secretariat), a post which he

used to develop political support from the labor movement. During his tenure in the Secretariat, Perón introduced generous fringe benefits, wage increases, and the enforcement of labor legislation, gaining increased political ascendancy within Argentine labor organizations.

The authoritarian measures of the military regime generated great political and civic uneasiness in large sectors of Argentine society. Awakened and inspired by the imminent fall of European fascist regimes, political opponents to the dictatorship began to mobilize, calling for a return to democratic rule. A massive mobilization of opposition forces in defense of "constitutionalism and liberty" took place in Buenos Aires in September 1945. The protest was followed a few days later by an aborted military coup from dissident liberal groups of the Armed Forces. President General Farrell, pressured by members of the cabinet and the Armed Forces, dismissed Perón from his governmental post and imprisoned him on Martín García Island in early October 1945. At Perón's departure, his partisans in the labor unions launched a campaign for his freedom that culminated in a mass mobilization of working-class sectors to Buenos Aires's central square in October 17.¹ After some negotiations, Perón was released and allowed to address the crowd of supporters from the balcony of the governmental house in Plaza de Mayo. In his speech, which was broadcasted on the radio, Perón promised to lead the people to victory in the upcoming presidential elections. The campaign polarized around the figure of Perón and the *Union Democrática*, an electoral coalition that integrated the then most relevant political parties (UCR, Socialist Party, Partido Demócrata-Progresista, and Communist Party) with the aim to fight what they considered was a pro-fascist military dictatorship. The

¹ October 17, 1945 is considered as the founding day of Peronism and since then has remained as the most significant episode of Peronist imagery. For an analysis of the political events of that day see Torre 1995. For an analysis of the symbolic uses of the event, see Plotkin 2003, chapters 3 and 4

electoral results gave the victory to Perón's formula. While the electoral outcomes displayed a relative parity of forces between Perón and his contenders, the distribution of electors, legislative members, and governorships gave an overwhelming majority to the former's political force.

Perón's government inaugurated a new era in Argentine history characterized by the full incorporation of popular sectors into public life. Particularly during the first administration, the government promoted a strategy of economic growth and full employment based on a process of income redistribution via wage increases. This also included industry promotion by stimulating consumption and the expansion of the domestic market, the provision of subsidies and credit, and the addition of protectionist tariffs. Throughout Perón's two administrations, trade unions were strengthened under a corporatist scheme of state supervision and the working class' share of the national income rose dramatically: the share of wages in the National Gross Domestic Product jumped from 37 per cent in 1946 to 47 percent in 1955, largely thanks to the generalization of a system of collective bargaining that covered more than 80% of unionized workers.

The historical resilience of Peronism cannot be solely explained in terms of the substantial improvements the regime generated in the material conditions of the working class. Peronism also played a crucial symbolic role via the politics of recognition (*dignificación*) of popular sectors that resulted in the democratization of everyday life interactions, such as those in the workplace and public spaces, as well as the democratization of consumption patterns and leisure activities. In this way, the policies and initiatives of the regime altered established patterns of deference and respect that had previously regulated the interaction between elites and the popular sector. The distributive and symbolic dimension of the policies of Peronism profoundly changed the nature

of Argentine society and gave way to a political and economic system in which popular sectors acquired a predominant place. That is what has established Peronism as an enduring political force that, despite its many faces and incarnations, still retains (seven decades after its birth) considerable electoral support within the lower classes.

While there has been ample discussion of the economic and redistributive policies implemented during the period (Collier and Collier 1991: 331-343) as well as about the "politics of recognition" that Peronism promoted within the working classes and the poor, none of those aspects is the focus of this article. Rather, in the next section the analysis seeks to disentangle the institutional features that gave the democratic experience of the Perón years its distinctiveness. As it will be shown, Peronism expressed a particular form of power exercise that laid out the foundations of the modern populist conception of democracy. The democratic imprint that Peronism promoted between 1946 and 1955 resulted in a particular interpretation of democratic ideals, one that has gained ascendancy in recent years. The next section describes the institutional features that contributed to the building of the populist democratic model.

II. The populist model of democracy

Modern populism is an original response to a particular global and regional conjuncture. On the one hand, global politics were marked by the end of World War II and the efforts of a triumphant United States to spread the model of liberal democracy to those countries where fascism had been defeated. On the other hand, Latin America was facing what the literature would refer to as "a crisis of incorporation" that signaled the decline of the oligarchic order and the arrival of mass politics. Latin American populist regimes would play a pivotal role in that historical juncture

as a vehicle for working class mobilization (Collier and Collier 1992; Germani 1971). They offered a particular democratizing path to channel the transition from semi-democratic or openly authoritarian regimes into mass democracy. In doing so, they helped establish a distinctive democratic model: populist democracy. Modern populism embraces the principle of popular sovereignty, establishing it as the organizing dimension of democratic politics. In doing so, populist democracy places elections as the paradigmatic mechanism of a plebiscitarian understanding of democratic representation that is openly hostile to other dimensions of representative democracy such as the principle of limited government. The rise of Peronism gave life to the first and most classical expression of modern populism, creating an elected populist regime that inaugurated a new stage in the broader history of populism. As Federico Finchelstein puts it, “If democracy starts in Athens, modern democratic populism starts in Buenos Aires” (Finchelstein 2004: 468).

What are the main tenets of the populist democratic model? The ideal of populist democracy organizes around three pillars: a) establishing elections as the key institutional mediation between leader and the people, b) undermining the centrality of liberal intermediating structures such as parliament and the public sphere, and c) erasing the distinction between constitutional and ordinary legislation.

Elections

In light of the historical challenges that Argentina encountered in consolidating a democratic regime based on free and competitive elections, it is not surprising that elections played a key role in developing the democratic credentials of Peronism. Elections provided the pivotal element for granting democratic character to an otherwise illiberal regime that introduced authoritarian practices and institutions

in several areas of political life. Electoral reform had been a key issue in the agenda of opposition movements seeking to democratize the oligarchic order. The passing of the Sáenz Peña law in 1912 made possible the election of an opposition leader to the presidency, breaking the hold that conservative elites had enjoyed on the presidential selection formula (Botana 1977). The electoral triumph of Radical Party leader Hipólito Yrigoyen in 1916 inaugurated an era of mass electoral politics in Argentina, yet the experience was short-lived: in September 10, 1930 a military coup put an end to this democratic period. While the military did not remain in power for long, calling for elections in November 1931, the return to civilian rule was tarnished by fraudulent electoral practices and the proscription of the Radical Party. The period became known as the “Infamous Decade” due to the predominance of a political system based on manipulated elections. Such a background explains why the issue of free elections figured as a prominent aspect of Perón’s rhetoric. On numerous occasions he made reference to past violations of the electoral rights of the population and proudly declared that the days of electoral fraud were finally over:

“In the political realm... we swept away all the ills that affected the country for almost a century, and we began by suppressing what gave Argentine democracy a vice of nullity: electoral fraud, fraud that made visible to the eyes of any spectator what an awful and terrible lie Argentine democracy was...” (Perón 1949: 21)

The free nature of elections was also repeatedly stressed:

“Today Argentine elections are honorable and clean, and there will be no fraud as long as I am in office, since it is my belief that there can be no democracy based on the lie of a staged election.

This has been our greatest political achievement. For many years, our country witnessed fraudulent elections. Elections were carried out in the post office, where the content of the ballot box was changed, or in the very voting site, where citizens were not allowed to vote. Because here we have witnessed a man who went to vote, who after handing his document to the authorities would be answered: 'it's okay (sic), you have already voted' and the one that had voted for him was the local *caudillo*. All elections were like that. A permanent lie. We had the Army supervise every electoral ballot box... and put an end to fraud." (Perón, 1949, p. 97)

Elections, alongside the principle of social justice, became the defining feature of the Peronist model of democracy. Peronism granted elections a paradigmatic role as the key intermediating mechanism between the Argentine people and their leader. In this sense, elections gained preeminence over other mechanisms of political intermediation that were dear to liberalism, such as parliament or the public sphere.

Perón devoted a great deal of resources and time to electoral issues with the aim of preserving as well as expanding his electoral base. During Perón's initial administration the government actively promoted processes of suffrage expansion, most notably via the sanctioning in September 1947 of the law that granted women the right to vote. Another crucial moment was the granting of voting rights to the population that lived in the so-called "national territories," thanks to a law that changed their political status to that of provinces. Such process took place in three stages: in 1951, La Pampa and Chaco were "provincialized," followed by Misiones in 1953, and Neuquén, Río Negro, Formosa, Chubut y Santa Cruz in 1955. Both initiatives led to a notable growth of the Argentine electorate and strengthened Peronism's electoral performance in ulterior electoral contexts (Little, 1973).

Elections, specially presidential ones, occupy a place of privilege in the populist democratic model for they represent the paradigmatic instance of institutional intermediation between leader and people. Electoral institutions seek to establish the political and institutional supremacy of the presidential figure over other representative institutions. To that end, the regime promoted a series of practices to ensure its electoral supremacy. The sanctioning of the 1949 constitution introduced important changes into the electoral system, most of all, the replacement of indirect by direct voting in the presidential formula, the possibility of the immediate and unlimited reelection of the President, and the replacement of the system of the Saenz Peña's law's incomplete lists with a winner-takes-all type of scheme. The change in the electoral system, as the well the obstacles that opposition voices faced in a government-manipulated public sphere, contributed to the reduction of opposition representation in congress: in the 1951 election Peronists obtained 90% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Additional measures were implemented with the aim of weakening the electoral strength of opposition forces. In districts that had been electorally adverse, such as the city of Buenos Aires, the government engaged in gerrymandering practices that resulted in subsequent processes of district redesign in 1951 and 1954. In addition, a 1949 law established electoral limitations on the formation of coalitions with the clear objective of preventing the emergence of a new "Unión Democrática".

Elections (and their complement, mass mobilizations) are conceived as mechanisms of acclamation, not of representation. Elections are understood in a plebiscitarian key as a mechanism that merely confirm a leader's claim to incarnate the people. Thus elections do not function under a representative logic of production of temporary majorities and minorities or for that matter of a democratic leadership. Instead, they certify the dual nature of populist leadership: the leader "... was at the same time an elected

representative and a quasi-transcendental conductor of people” (Finchelstein, 2014: 199). Elections consequently acquire an extraordinary dimension; they represent an exceptional decisional moment that bestows upon the winner the right to impose his will over the rest of society. The following reflection of Perón regarding the meaning of his electoral triumph helps to illustrate the populist differences between this model of will formation and a liberal-representative one based on the deliberative interplay between majorities and minorities:

“... (we) confronted our firm and unbreakable will to the will of our opponents there is only one problem to elucidate: who is right and who has the acquired right to impose his own will? We have given the people the opportunity to choose, in the most honest election in Argentine history, between us and our opponents; the people have chosen us. Consequently, that problem is over. In the Argentine republic, what we decide is what is done.” (Perón, 1949: 9)

The electoral outcome forecloses any ulterior debate, conferring the “right to impose” the will of majoritarian forces over the rest of the political spectrum. In such conception, there is no space for the principle of legitimate opposition. Rather, those defeated at the ballot box are to subordinate themselves to the majoritarian will embodied in the person of the president. As Perón put it:

“it is necessary to obey whatever the majority decides, for it is the only way in a democracy to realize the will of the majority.... The free play of wills lasts until a decision is made. Once the decision is made, there must be an unconditional subordination to the decision of the majority” (Perón 1949: 29).

As Bernard Manin argues, when the majority will be equalized to the general will, minorities lose all political status (Manin, 1987: 360). Democratization is conceived of as the imposition of an alleged “popular will” over the rest of society. The latter opens up a questionable effort at political homogenization inspired by the untenable fiction of a unanimous will that leaves no space for critics of the administration:

“Our doctrine... is a patriotic doctrine. Therefore, I see no inconvenience in introducing it everywhere. If it were a bad doctrine I would be the first one in challenging it; but being a good one, we should try to introduce it everywhere, in all men and women so we can assure the triumph of a unified collective action.” (Perón, 1949: 46)

Erasing the distinction between constitutional and ordinary legislation

The realization of the principle of popular sovereignty demands erasing the distinction between ordinary and constitutional law. The constitution must reflect, not limit, the majoritarian will. To this end, populist regimes engage in processes of constitution-making that seek to replace the liberal notion of limited government with the principle of “unlimited elected government”. The plebiscitarian understanding of elections has to be translated into constitutional terms. Populist constitutionalism appeals to a questionable notion of constituent power to dismantle constitutional limits on popular sovereignty. From such a perspective, rights should not be external to power but are an expression of it: constitutional norms should reflect popular aspirations, not limit them. The populist conception of constitutionalism was clearly reflected in the statement of the new President of the Supreme Court, who declared that:

“The distinction of different governmental functions should not lead us to forget that the authority is always one. Expression of such authority is what the constitution refers to as the ‘supreme chief,’ to whose will all executive decrees and judicial decisions should conform...”
(Tomas Casares, quoted from Negretto 2012: 123)

Populist constitutionalism is hostile to the liberal notion of an autonomous judiciary. Such hostility translates into efforts at eliminating the autonomy of the judicial branch. Usually the first targets of populist administrations are apex courts, since they are the institution that is responsible for upholding the distinction between constitutional and ordinary politics (Arato 2017). Other targets are those agencies that integrate what Guillermo O’Donnell has referred as the mechanisms of horizontal accountability (lower courts, comptrollers, public prosecutors, electoral courts, ombudsmen, etc.) (O’Donnell 1993). Perón promoted the removal of the majority of Justices of the Supreme Court in his first year in office. In September 1946, the Chamber of Deputies impeached all but one Justice of the Court (who had openly declared his support for Perón) with the vote of 104 deputies and the opposition of 47 members of the opposition. The Senate unanimously approved the removal of the Justices.

Processes of constitutional reform also figure prominently in populist regimes. In 1948, Perón launched a constitution-making process whose aim was to establish “a Justicialist successor to the constitution of 1853” (Rock, 1987: 288). While the need for constitutional reform had been raised by other political forces, such as the Radical Party, the dynamics that the process of constitutional reform acquired indicated that the reform was not envisioned as a consensual undertaking. Under populism, processes of constitution-making adopt a supra-constitutional character: in this case, the process

did not follow established amendment procedures, and instead the government resorted to a plebiscitarian strategy that resulted in the election of an unbound conventional assembly (Negretto 2012). The project of constitutional reform presented without previous announcement to the Chamber of Deputies on August 13, 1948 did not specify which sort of amendments would be subject to debate and called for a full delegation of powers to a constitutional convention. The Radical Party objected, arguing that such a procedure would give the convention a blank check that could affect the integrity of basic principles of the structure of republican government, and that such a procedure was aimed at avoiding a parliamentary debate with the opposition (Negretto 2012). Despite the opposition’s objections, the project was approved and an electoral campaign for the election of conventional delegates took place that resulted in the victory of Peronism, whose supporters gained majoritarian control of the assembly.

The dynamics of the constitution-making process was one of imposition, a logic that was conceptually justified by the main ideologist behind the reform. According to Arturo Sampay:

“A constitution determines the ordering of the governmental powers of a sovereign political community, the distributing of the functions of those powers, which one is the dominant sector in the political community and which are the goals assigned to the political community by that dominant sector.” (cited in Argumedo, 1989: 57)

The project that was finally approved express the personal wishes of Perón, who notably expanded his authority over the legislative branch, introduced the possibility of unlimited presidential reelection, and saw the emergency powers of the executive expanded and strengthened. Perón explicitly referred to the new document as being a “Peronist” or a “Justicialist”

constitution, underlining in this way the excluding logic that prevailed throughout the constitution-making process. It is illustrative to see the way Perón referred to the 1949 Constitution as a document that exclusively reflected the political will of the majoritarian party:

“The essential principles of the Peronist doctrine now shine as the polar star of the nation in the preamble of the new Justicialist Constitution... no well born Argentine can refuse to support what we want when we affirm our irrevocable decision to constitute a socially just, economically independent, and politically sovereign nation, without relinquishing his/her title of Argentine.” (Perón, 1983: 175)

In the eyes of the opposition, the brief constitution-making process represented an empty act destined to satisfy presidential political ambitions, particularly of solving the problem of political succession by amending the article that banned the possibility of an immediate presidential reelection. The procedure, far from cementing a new institutional compromise, served to further polarize Argentine society into two irreconcilable camps.

Undermining the centrality of liberal intermediating structures such as parliament and the public sphere

The privileging of elections as a mechanism of acclamation demand the parallel dismantling of representative instances of political intermediation: parliament and the public sphere. Under a plebiscitarian model, parliament is placed in a subordinate role towards the executive, acting fundamentally as a receptor and organizer of presidential decrees (Waldmann, 1981: 63-64). During Perón's years the absence of

a strong legislative opposition facilitated the efforts at establishing the institutional supremacy of the executive over the other powers. Throughout the two administrations, Peronism dominated both chambers, facing only the opposition of a reduced number of Radical Party legislators in the chamber of deputies. The impressive legislative labor of the first years of Perón's administration, which is frequently cited as an example of congressional dynamism, concealed the fact that most of those laws had originated in the executive. In fact, many of the legislative measures represented mere ratifications of executive decrees that had been promulgated by the prior military regime. According to Mario Justo Lopez, in 1946 congress approved around 500 decrees, in 1947, 56 decrees and in 1949, 472 decrees, all dictated by the previous de facto administration (Lopez, 1961, p. 113). The 1949 constitution weakened the accountability role of the legislative over the executive power while simultaneously strengthening the legislative prerogatives of the presidency (Negretto 2012; Waldmann 1981: 63, 100-1).

Another important intermediating structure that was seriously weakened was the public sphere. While in congress, Peronists employed their majority to undermine parliamentary debate, and a series of censorship and repressive measures sought to silence opposition voices in the media. The government seized control of newsprint distribution and exerted all sorts of pressures on opposition media outlets and journalists. Simultaneously, state sponsored media mounted relentless propaganda campaigns aimed at discrediting the independent media and opposition forces. The most vociferous opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, was eventually expropriated and sold to the CGT labor union. Lastly, the government ran a chain of radio stations and newspapers as well as a generously financed system of state propaganda.

Through the described initiatives, Peronism produced a distinctive democratic model that

combined electoral and illiberal features into a new synthesis. Since then, modern populism established itself as a constant presence in democratic politics that acquired particular relevance in moments of political hardship. Populism erupts into the public sphere wherever representative institutions are in crisis, providing an alternative interpretation of democratic ideals. As such, it is a specter that haunts liberal representative regimes when they are weakened by citizen disaffection. In contemporary times, populism has made a comeback as many democracies are confronting economic hardships and growing political disaffection

III. Populism's comeback: the global diffusion of the populist democratic model

Populism returned with particular force in the aftermath of the third democratizing wave. The latter resulted in an impressive diffusion of liberal representative institutions to different regions of the world. In some regions, like Latin America and Europe, the process of democratization reached continental dimensions. It is precisely those regions where populism has made its strongest comeback, unlocking an ideological dispute over what democracy means. Contemporary populism gains prominence in already democratized societies in junctures where existing representative arrangements are in crisis: it appears as a democratic answer to the crisis of democracy.

The populist wave started in Latin America in 1999 with the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, which was soon followed by Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Hugo Morales in Bolivia, and Kirchner in Argentina. It subsequently spread to Europe, most notably, Hungary and Poland, and lastly to the United States

with the arrival of Donald Trump's presidency.²

The current centrality that modern populism enjoys is not only due to its geographical spread but also because of its attainment of governmental status in societies where populist forces were traditionally relegated to a politics of outsiders and marginal forces (Peruzzotti 2017). That is the case of Europe or the United States, where populist parties have gained a considerable electoral following in different countries and in some cases, reached power. Hungary, Poland, and the United States are experiencing the realities of populism as government as well as the attempts of those administrations to redefine the institutional landscape in a populist direction. Efforts at regime building took place or are currently underway in Ecuador, Venezuela, Hungary, and Poland.

Many contemporary democracies are witness to efforts at establishing populist regimes whose genealogy can be traced back to those processes that took place in Latin America during the second wave of democratization. An analysis of the historical process that led to the creation of modern populism can shed light into the challenges that many democracies are confronting nowadays.

There is, however, an important distinction to make regarding the contextual conditions that marked the emergence of modern and contemporary forms of populism. Classical Peronism as well as the other regimes that followed in the 1940s and 1950s in Latin America, emerged in societies that were yet not fully democratized. In fact, populist movements played a pivotal role at democratizing regimes that were either openly authoritarian or semi-democratic by expanding suffrage (and thus broadening the scope of electoral politics), promoting inclusionary welfare policies, and engaging in the politics of recognition. While some of those initiatives undoubtedly resulted in processes of social inclusion, the legacy of such

² On the global ascendancy of populism see De la Torre 2014; De la Torre and Peruzzotti 2008; Moffitt 2017; Judis 2016

experiences is a troublesome one at the level of regime-building for they created an institutional blueprint that suppressed key dimensions of liberal representative democracy. In brief, modern populism was a specific path towards democratization, offering an alternative road to democracy than that of liberal representative democracy. While the democratic model they implemented had many questionable features, those experiences nevertheless represented a democratic accomplishment when contrasted with the regimes and societies that preceded them.

By contrast, contemporary expressions of populism take place in already democratized societies. The most relevant expressions of populism as government have taken place in societies that had been successfully democratized during the third wave. So while the forms of political self-understanding of present populists do not significantly differ from those that inspired the building of populist regimes in the 1940s, contextual conditions set those two experiences apart. Contemporary populist governments emerged within democratic regimes that while facing serious crisis, still provided social and institutional mechanisms to make government accountable and could be set into motion to challenge the authoritarian features of those administrations. So the attempts by present administrations to redesign the institutional landscapes of current regimes in a plebiscitarian direction might be challenged by opposition forces within the political system or in the public sphere.

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