

Latin America at The Crossroads: Populism and Alternatives to the Crises

GIACOMO FINZI¹

Abstract. Latin America has often been considered a political laboratory for populism. In recent years, new left-wing governments and the emergence of an alternative right-wing in many countries may have theoretically and analytically changed the notion of populism. Do they have something in common with 20th-century populism? To address this question, the theoretical framework on populism will first be presented to provide analytical tools that introduce categories and key elements. This article will explore the structural causes of populism in Latin America. Three main perspectives will be considered by exploring populist literature: (neo)liberal, new left, and alternative right. Finally, contemporary populist regimes (both left and right-wing) will be analysed to bring about a theoretical and analytical synthesis.

Keywords: Populism; Neoliberalism; Authoritarianism; Anarcho-capitalism; Libertarianism.

Introduction

In recent years, extreme right-wing governments have spread through Latin American countries. The recent election of Javier Milei in Argentina (December 2023), the re-election of

¹ Giacomo Finzi, Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium). Email address: Giacomo.finzi@uclouvain.be.

Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (February 2024), and the election of Daniel Noboa in Ecuador (November 2023) seem to confirm the emergence of a new right-wing or alternative right hegemony, combining new discourse and practice. Does this correspond to a new category of populism? Does it have something in common with 20th-century classic populism? Are these regimes compatible with democracy? At present, it is premature to provide a definitive answer. However, to propose a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to include the left-wing tradition, as Latin America also has a long-standing tradition of left-wing populist leaders and governments.

In this sense, the new left-wing governments headed by Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (July 2018) and his successor, Claudia Scheinbaum (June 2024) in Mexico, Gabriel Boric (November 2021) in Chile, Gustavo Petro (June 2022) in Colombia, Luis Arce (October 2020) in Bolivia, Xiomara Castro (December 2021) in Honduras, and the return of Lula Inácio da Silva (October 2022) in Brazil may confirm the persistence of the left-wing populist tradition in Latin American countries. But again, should they be considered essentially populist regimes? Do they share any elements with the first generation of populism and the 21st-century populist waves?

1. Theoretical Framework and Perspectives: Latin American Literature Review on Populism / Studies on Populism

To respond to these questions, this article will explore literature focused on Latin American populism, considering its long-standing tradition in Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, and Economics. First, populism is a political and historical category: it is an analytical concept and a historiographic category (Zanatta, 2004) that emerged in Latin

American studies “as identity-based reactions to the crisis of liberal democracy in the name of a mythical people. It is obvious that they are different in different historical contexts” (Zanatta, 2016).

There is often an interesting gap between Latin American literature and global literature on populism, highlighting idiosyncrasies and specificities in its history, crossing politics, economics, and culture. Moreover, Latin American literature focuses on nation-building processes, independence, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, modernization and democratization processes, and the market.

In this study, we opt for a non-dogmatic approach and definition of populism. For this reason, populism will be analysed in a non-pejorative manner, as pejorative and moral approaches may often obscure scientific analysis and limit its scope. Furthermore, we consider populism as an ongoing concept, evolving with social and political changes.

Comparing the first generation of populism in Latin America (mid-20th century) and 21st-century populism, we will provide key interpretative elements that may highlight similarities and differences. The new waves of populism in Latin American countries are summarized into four main waves: a) far-right-wing populism; b) left-wing “Socialism of the 21st Century”; c) alternative right populism; d) left-wing 2.0. By presenting each category in the second half of this article, we will also stress the boundaries between populism, authoritarianism, and fascism, as possible degenerations of the populist regime.

In general, we consider that populism is not fully equivalent to an authoritarian regime or a pure fascist regime, but they may converge towards hybrid regimes, especially in recent years. For this reason, political science may study these political doctrines, considering their hybridization.

In recent years, the main literature from Latin America and the Western world has often shifted its analysis to the boundaries with fascism, post-fascism, and neo-fascism. Populism in Latin American countries may in some way converge with each of these, without being fully encompassed by any single one. Nowadays, it is quite difficult to define boundaries between far-right populism, alternative right, and far-right (Stefanoni, 2022, p.39).

Populist studies also require determining the main differences between right-wing and left-wing regimes within political cleavages. Does populism transcend these political categories? Does this cleavage explain anything about the Latin American political party system?

According to our theoretical framework (Vilas, 2003; Germani, 2003; Ronsavallon, 2020; Laclau, 2005), we summarise that this research will lead to a study on populism based on multidimensional and multidisciplinary approaches:

- a) Power and Quality of Leadership: messianism, charisma of the leader, based on extraordinary capacities and qualities of leaders.
- b) Leadership Style and Emotions: the affective dimension of emotions, rationality, and irrationality.
- c) Ideology and Political Strategy: Performative and communicative dimensions, normative aspects, and communication tools. “Direct democracy” between the leader and the people to bypass other political or social intermediaries.
- d) Political Discourse Towards the Masses: Unifying and divisive rhetoric, “Us *vs.* Them,” addressing both internal and external threats.
- e) Social Alliances: Corporatism, close relations with the people, special relations with armed forces, and religions: the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion.

- f) Plebiscitarian Democracy: Procedural democracy, elections, and constituent assembly elections as means of legitimacy.
- g) Checks and Balances for Democracy: Constituent power, hyper-presidentialism, and clashes with the judiciary system, legislative power, opposition, and mass media. The leader demonstrates unifying power against internal and external threats.

2. Structural Causes

There is a general interest in the literature in understanding why Latin America should be considered the laboratory par excellence of populism, from its origins to the present day. Key answers may be found in nation-building, democratisation, modernisation processes, and market expansion, persisting among conflicts, inequalities, exclusion, and social crises (Germani, 2003; Di Tella, 1965). Indeed, from the early beginnings of Latin American populism, we see the emergence of extraordinary leaders (e.g., Perón, Haya de la Torre, Gaitán, Vargas, and Cárdenas) who call for a special relationship with the people, overcoming any political and social intermediation, and proposing an alternative power to the oligarchic and elite establishment.

In our approach, we may explain populism's origins by using an analogy with market rules, based on the "supply and demand" of populism in any society. Political, economic, and social crises may increase the social demand for a populist leader, called upon to end long-standing crises.

By focusing on history and political categories, populism was a key process for modernisation in Latin American countries. Populism was a form of authoritarian domination that included those excluded from politics (Germani, 2003). From its

origins, populism has incorporated social inclusion as a core element, required to build consensus with the electorate.

In this sense, populism has also been crucial for the expansion of democracy: populist leaders have always led the struggles for universal suffrage, civic, and economic rights. In Latin American contemporary history, populism emerged as a key moment for the expansion of democratisation processes. Indeed, populist leaders moved against elite theory (Mosca, 1923, 1945, Pareto, 1916, 1974, and Michels, 2008) and oligarchy in general. Democratisation was equally required for the modernization of the state.

In Latin American countries, the common scenario in the 1930s-1950s contributed to the birth of populism: in general, most nation-states in Latin America were not fully democratic, while oligarchic power maintained the establishment. In that context, populism emerged as a credible alternative to establish a new hegemony.

Populist leaders reinforced economic growth and social welfare, especially through industrialisation via import substitution² (ISI). By ISI, populist leaders used market regulation as a political and social tool. In fact, the mixed economy with a strong state-nation and regulatory power allowed for financing social interventionism, income redistribution, and a new generation of political, social, and labour rights (e.g., universal suffrage, strike rights, working holidays). By combining corporatism and patronage, including the active role of the main trade unions, populist leaders established a new regime through social mobilisation and nationalism. In international relations,

² The Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) was a development strategy focusing on promoting domestic production of previously imported goods to foster industrialisation (Bussell, Britannica). For more information, see Cardoso and Faletto (1969), Marini (1969, 1973), and Gunder Frank (1979).

populist leaders also opted for a non-aligned foreign policy, combining nationalism and anti-imperialism.

In general, populist literature stresses the social effects of democratic *malaise*, facing incomplete democratisation processes:

- a) Wounded or incomplete democratisation (fragility of institutions and incomplete separation of powers);
- b) Polarised democracy, according to political cleavages (Rokkan, Lipset, 1967);
- c) Populism as an alternative to crises and establishment power: against the status quo and oligarchic power;
- d) Illiberal/antiliberal liberalism;
- e) Systemic crises: combining economic, social, political, and environmental crises.

In recent times, democratic crises also arise from the emergence of “illiberal liberalism.” Through this oxymoron, Latin America is presented as a key element to understand the rise of the Alternative Right, which might be hegemonic in the coming decades.

3. Latin American Perspectives on Populism

In general, the Latin American literature on populism varies across different theoretical approaches and depends on each national political process and its evolution. Indeed, there are different perceptions and political sensibilities in populist studies, as well as varying appreciations of their leaders. In this article, we summarise the vast literature on populism using three

main perspectives³: a) (Neo)liberal; b) New Left; c) Alternative Right.

a. The (Neo)Liberal Perspective

The (neo)liberal perspective generally has a negative view of populism. Liberal and (neo)liberal scholars (Naím and Smith, 2000) focus on the values, structures, and formal mechanisms of liberal democracy, with the free market being a key element in their analysis. Therefore, the three main variables are: free market, free elections, and balance of powers. For these reasons, populism is mainly considered an obstacle that might alter and diminish free election processes. Populist leaders generally concentrate and centralize their own power, which can partially restrict and limit electoral competition. Single-party competition (or a limited multiparty system) alters electoral competition; strong leadership tools, political co-option through trade unions, and corporative measures may affect liberal democracy in general.

The second key variable is the maintenance of the free market. Historically, populism has played an active role in economics, combining nationalism, protectionism, corporatism, state regulation, and interventionism. Subsidy schemes are essential parts of the populist agenda. Through state regulatory control and interventionism, populism can build social consensus and consolidate an electoral base by improving the wealth and social conditions of the lower and middle classes. In effect, populism has used the social agenda as a core element of its

³ Of course, this is a “simplistic” synthesis that leaves out the nuances of Latin American literature on populism. However, it is useful to summarise the literature review using these three main approaches, acknowledging the contradictory and ambivalent sensibilities regarding populism.

consensus scheme: by improving their material conditions, populist leaders build loyalty with the people.

The third key element that liberalism and (neo)liberalism criticise in populism is its impact on the balance of powers, a core element for the persistence of liberal democracy. Populism in Latin America has often imposed limits on the structural, nominal, and functional elements of democracy. These approaches prioritise formal and operational democracy. In this regard, populist leaders may interfere with legislative, electoral, media, and judiciary powers, limiting the traditional separation of powers and checks and balances in democracy. The rights of opposition parties and movements may not be guaranteed, with political and judicial persecution being very common.

For all these key elements, according to the (neo)liberal perspective, populism is considered a degenerative form of liberal democracy, irreconcilable with democratic values and standards, regardless of whether it is a left-wing or right-wing populist regime.

b. The New Left Perspective

In contrast, the New Left literature has a different perception of populism. It may vary in a dialectical approach, oscillating between two opposite streams: populism may contribute strengthen to democracy through its democratising effects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018), and at the same time, it may be considered a degeneration of democracy (Acosta, 2015; Prada, 2011; Muñoz, 2014; López, 2016; Sierra, 2017).

These fluctuations may vary depending on each political doctrine, leadership, and regime. In the positive perception, populism may emerge as an alternative and response to crises,

an organic crisis in Gramscian terms: a populist leader may provide responses to social and economic crises. Populism may also aggregate a new political center against a weakened and disenfranchised political class, establishing a new political hegemony.

In the first bloc, we summarise theoretical and analytical approaches towards the new populist wave in the 21st century, particularly related to the Socialism of the 21st Century and, most recently, the second wave of progressive Latin American governments since 2018.

Most scholars of the New Left perspective analyse the emergence of the “progressive” governments that flourished in Latin America with hope: they could have represented the end of the “*larga noche neoliberal*” and the possible refoundation of the nation-state, against corruption and the establishment’s hegemony.

These scholars focus on the uprisings of Hugo Chávez’s governments in Venezuela (1998-2013), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007-2017), and Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006-2019). Latin American literature also includes a different strand on “moderate” populism, such as the Argentinian governments of Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007-2015), the Paraguayan government of Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), and the Brazilian governments of Lula Inácio da Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), as well as the Honduran government of Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009).

These perspectives are linked by their focus on the positive effects on democracy and the state. During the New Left Wave at the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America became a political laboratory for global radical left movements: optimism and hope were the most general commentary of the early governments. Social movements and radical left parties spread in Western Europe, combining slogans with Latin American

Bolivarianism. Greek Syriza and Spanish Podemos were influenced by this radical discourse of the Socialism of the 21st Century, particularly its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric⁴.

The New Left perspective research primarily emphasises the positive effects on democracy and the state's regulatory mandate in economics, which allows for social redistribution and welfare improvements.

They also highlight the positive impact of democratic expansion. In this context, constituent power and political and economic stabilisation are considered essential elements for a complete democracy. Reforms such as E-voting, new constitutions, and the emergence of a new generation of rights are seen as significant social achievements, particularly for the lower classes.

These elements are part of the necessary democratisation process in the face of an unfulfilled democracy. Populism may contribute to radicalising democracy, as the full process of democratisation (Moore, 1973) has not yet been achieved.

The concentration of power in the leader and hyper-presidentialism is mediated by the social agenda of populist left-wing governments. Indeed, there is also a new generation of rights: economic, social, and environmental. In this sense, populism improves the general conditions of citizenship by expanding democratic functioning and providing political, social, and economic rights to the working class and the most vulnerable citizens.

⁴ According to Kioupkiolis, the Greek Syriza and the Spanish Podemos are influenced by Latin American left-wing populism. Kioupkiolis (2016) "Podemos: the Ambiguous Promises of Left-wing Populism in Contemporary Spain" *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21 (2).

At the same time, populism might contribute to stabilising the economy through neo-developmental policies and alternative economics, as seen in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. The Washington Consensus (Williamson, 2009) is replaced by the Commodities Consensus (Svampa, 2012): nationalisation, an active role played by the state, public investments, and social redistribution are essential for maintaining the government.

On the other hand, there is also a New Left perspective focused on the risks and negative effects of populism on democracy. They stress the hyper-presidential leadership style, combining Caesarism and Bonapartism (Gramsci, 1996). Case studies are based on states of exception, which include human rights violations, political persecution and violence, co-optation of social movements, and concentration of power by the presidency. This degeneration is observed in the progressive governments of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela, as well as Nicaragua as El Salvador.

New Left scholars analyse corporatism, the role of trade unions and the armed forces, and the legislative and judiciary powers versus democracy. Strategic alliances strengthen presidential power, undermine political and social opposition, and diminish checks and balances systems.

In this regard, populism may also be considered a degenerative form of democracy, as it can lead to authoritarianism. The recent events in the Venezuelan presidential elections (July 28th, 2024) confirm doubts about the possible degeneration and hollowing out of democracy: minimal principles of free elections are not fully respected, suspicions of fraud, hyper-presidentialism, lack of balance of powers, military repression and social control, new elite groups, and the impotence of international observers and the international community in

general may determine the end of the honeymoon between the New Left and the Bolivarian regime⁵.

c. The Alternative Right Perspective

The Alternative Right perspective on populism emphasises the positive effects on democracy and the market, focusing on the new ideological and leadership style: it is seen as the cure to restore the free market and reestablish acceptable standards of limited democracy (Hayek, 1960, 1981; Guzman, 1962, 1979, 1979a, 1982).

The Alternative Right may combine traditionalism and modernity, secular and Christian values, conservatism and libertarianism. Its discourse arises from the necessity of reestablishing democracy and values against both internal and external threats in a world dominated by ‘Marxist’ forces.

There is, indeed, an internal enemy and anti-communism rhetoric, which directly recalls Cold War discourse and practice, notwithstanding the unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990) gave way to an emerging multipolar world.

Moreover, the Alternative Right does not entirely exclude or condemn authoritarian methods, combining them within democracy; in fact, authoritarianism is legitimised as a necessary evil to destroy Marxism and Neo-Marxism (the “Marxist cancer,” as General Pinochet’s regime proudly declared after the September 11th, 1973, coup).

For this reason, the Alternative Right may conduct a ‘legitimate’ campaign with civilisation crusade tones against trade

⁵ The New Left perspectives are still debating whether Maduro’s government maintains the minimal standards of democracy. According to their different viewpoints, they express varying stances regarding the July 28th, 2024 elections.

unions, human rights associations, the international left, and more recently, against the LGBTIQ+ community, migrants, and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

The Alternative Right concentrates its efforts on fighting and minimising state power and its budget. The new generation of populist leaders inherited a dislike for the state, considered the main enemy, drawing from the idealism and practices of von Hayek, von Mises, and the Austrian school.

The difference between New Left populism and the Alternative Right lies in their relationship with the state: the latter demonises the state, while the New Left idealises it.

To better understand the rise of the Alternative Right in Latin America, it is crucial to study the origins of Illiberal Liberalism in Chile, particularly the political transition from an authoritarian regime toward a limited democracy: authoritarianism and neoliberalism in the post-Pinochet era, and the impact of the political thought of Friedrich von Hayek and Jaime Guzmán, the ideologue of the 1980 neoliberal and authoritarian constitution.

There is a thin line connecting Pinochet's regime and the emergence of Alternative Right leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei. These links are evident in the Chilean Constitution of 1980 and the neoliberal transformation carried out during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) under the influence of the philosophical and economic theories of Friedrich von Hayek and the ultra-conservative and authoritarian constitutionalist Jaime Guzmán.

This 1980 constitutional text contributed to creating the institutional architecture and ideological superstructure that accompanied the broad program of radical reforms dismantling the Welfare State in Chile. The Pinochet regime had previously privatised the main economic sectors and imposed – for the first time in the world – the creation of private pension and

social security systems, known as *Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones* (AFP).

Under the so-called *shock economy* (Klein, 2004) and with the contribution of the Chicago Boys, Milton Friedman and Friederich von Hayek, Chile became a laboratory for the neoliberal reforms, not only in Latin America but globally. It inspired some of the strategies implemented by Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. during the '80s, as well as the privatisation policies applied in the ex-Soviet countries, Eastern Europe during the post-communist transition, and more recently in Western Europe, Asia, MENA, Africa and the rest of Latin America.

In Chile, the “democratic transition” led by the governments of the *Concertación por la Democracia* (a centre-left coalition that ruled the country uninterruptedly until 2010), never questioned the economic and social model, while maintaining the main principle of the Neoliberal transition. The idea of a minimal state persisted, reflecting the Hayekian philosophy and radical conservatism of Jaime Guzmán: liberty and authoritarianism coexisted in the post-Pinochet regime. The battle of ideas established neoliberalism as a hegemonic project at a global level, even among centre-left parties that ended up internalizing and reproducing the model.

In recent times, paleo-libertarianism and anarcho-capitalism have revalidated the thesis of the minimal state and liberty, reconciling it with authoritarian practices. In this regard, Alternative Right populism may be seen as a possible vehicle for the return of democracy against socialism and LGBTQI+ totalitarianism, the price to be paid for reestablishing democracy.

5. *Contemporary Populism in Latin America*

It is extremely hard to briefly analyse each populist government that has emerged in Latin America in the last few decades. However, this table contributes to understanding populism as a constant phenomenon in recent Latin American history. At the same time, it allows for the illustration of different categories and styles of populist mandates:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Presidency</i>	<i>Political wing</i>	<i>Years</i>
Peru	Alberto Fujimori	Right-wing	1990-2000
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	Left-wing	1999-2012
Colombia	Alvaro Uribe	Right-wing	2002-2010
Mexico	Vicente Fox	Right-wing	2000-2006
Brazil	Lula Inácio da Silva	Left-wing	2002-2011
Argentina	Nestor Kirchner	Left-wing	2003-2007
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	Left-wing	2005-2015
Bolivia	Evo Morales	Left-wing	2006-2019
Peru	Alan García	Right-wing	2006-2011
Honduras	Manuel Zelaya	Left-wing	2006-2009
Argentina	Kristina Fernandez	Left-wing	2007-2015
Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Left-wing	2008-2012
Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	Left-wing	2011-2016
Mexico	Enrique Peña Nieto	Right-wing	2012-2018
Mexico	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Left-wing	2018-2024
Brazil	Jair Bolsonaro	Right-wing	2019-2023
El Salvador	Nayib Bukele	Right-wing	2019-

Bolivia	Luís Arce	Left-wing	2020-
Peru	Pedro Castillo	Left-wing	2021-2022
Peru	Dina Boluarte	Right-wing	2022-
Colombia	Gustavo Petro	Left-wing	2022-
Honduras	Xiomara Castro	Left-wing	2022-
Brazil	Lula Inácio da Silva	Left-wing	2023-
Argentina	Javier Milei	Right-wing	2023-
Ecuador	Daniel Noboa	Right-wing	2023-
Mexico	Claudia Scheinbaum	Left-wing	2025-

To summarise and simplify, we identify four typologies of contemporary populist regimes that have emerged over the last three decades:

- a) Far Right populism in a New Cold-War language (1990-2010).
- b) Left-wing populism: Socialism of the 21st Century (1998-2013).
- c) Alternative Right or Right Wing 2.0 (2019-?).
- d) New progressive governments wave in Latin America (2019-?).

a. Far Right Populism in a New Cold-War Language

This category includes the governments of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Alan García (2006-2011), and Vicente Fox (2000-2006). These governments emerged between the 1990s and the early 21st century in Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Why should these be classified as populist governments? The debate centres on their political discourse and policies, considering the national context.

These governments are mainly products of political polarisation, with an ideological offensive conducted by political insurgencies. During the 1990s and early 21st century, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru faced an incipient risk of political destabilisation that could lead to a failed state. State weakness was challenged by political dissidents and crime agencies (e.g., guerrillas, drug cartels, and transnational mafias), legitimising a political discourse based on anti-communism rhetoric. This rhetoric openly recalls Cold-War discourse and strategy, even as the global world has entered a new multipolar phase.

In these contexts, Far Right populist leaders emerged. State weakness necessitated the presence of a strong leader, a one-man solution with a messianic character. The leader is an outsider of the establishment, who creates legitimacy against corrupt political classes incapable of providing concrete solutions. Similar to the Socialism of the 21st Century, Far Right populist leaders legitimized hyper-presidentialism due to internal threats.

These governments implemented counter-insurgent policies, mainly against guerrillas and armed groups. Their priorities were the restoration of democracy and institutional integrity against insurgent control. Military doctrines reinforced the armed forces, with an active role against the internal enemy. Security and intelligence measures extended their operations through social control, including human rights violations, militarisation, and state of exception. Political and military policies were accompanied by (neo)liberal policies on the social and economic fronts, juxtaposing political and social opposition as extensions of insurgent groups. These regimes combined internal and external enemy doctrines, legitimising a Cold War 2.0 discourse and practice.

In international relations, these governments legitimised U.S. hegemony on both hemispheric and global agendas. They

prioritised defence and economic cooperation policies. Security and defence cooperation agreements were products of hemispheric strategies on the “War on Drugs” and, consequently, the “War on Terrorism.” On the commercial agenda, Far Right populist governments opted for Free Trade Agreements with the U.S., E.U., Pacific Alliance, and A.L.C.A. (Free Trade Area of the Americas).

b. Left-Wing Populism: Socialism of the 21st Century

We refer to the left-wing populist governments that surged in Latin America in the early 21st century. From the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998), Latin America seemed to turn left. After Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, Chile and Uruguay also turned to left-wing governments. The rise and fall of left-wing populism are inspired by the umbrella of the Socialism of the 21st Century (Dieterich, 2003).

Left-wing populists emerged as a credible alternative by delegitimising the effects of neoliberal policies. Since the *Caracazo* in 1989, social outbreaks spread throughout Latin American countries. The Water War, the Gas War, and further indigenous and peasant mobilizations in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as social upheavals in Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, are notable examples. Social protests surged as poverty and unemployment rates increased, along with devaluation and interest rates, and the expansion of inequality.

These factors are among the main causes of the offensive against neoliberal governments. Indeed, there are structural, regional, and conjunctural causes that might have led to the rise of left-wing populist regimes. During these social outbreaks, new political leadership appeared against the “*larga noche neoliberal*,” capitalising on the malaise of the *status quo* and

the need for urgent measures to overcome economic and social crises. In most cases, the new leaders took advantage of political crises, corruption scandals, polarisation, and the inadequacy of the political system to find solutions to political and economic crises, capitalising on the impending collapse by providing their own agenda.

Therefore, populist leaders emerged as the One-man Solution, a messianic power who rises from the crisis and may provide solutions to it. Following the election of populist governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the refoundation of the nation-state gave rise to constituent power, leading to the drafting of new constitutions to consolidate democratic institutions and expand the transcendence of the popular mandate⁶. For this reason, during the first period of the left-wing populism, we had the expansion and radicalisation of democracy. While populist literature also focuses on electoral processes, we may mention the high peaks in voter turnout⁷.

Alongside democratising processes, left-wing populism has also provided social inclusion, with a new generation of social and economic rights within a welfare state promoted by state

⁶ From its first few months in power (1998-2013), Hugo Chávez expressed the necessity of opening a new constituent process to reform and radicalize Venezuelan democracy, establishing the Fifth Republic. Both Bolivian president Evo Morales (2005-2019) and Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa (2005-2015) called for a plurinational state, recognizing the rights of indigenous, Afro, and peasant communities, as well as the Rights of Nature and ancestral values like *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* (Buen Vivir). They also implemented a complex system of e-voting within a checks and balances democracy.

⁷ Bolivian presidential election reached the 84,5% of the voter turnout in 2005, 94,54% in 2009, 87,89% in 2014. Ecuadorean presidential election reached 76,01% of the voter turnout in 2006, 75,03% in 2009, 81,09% in 2013. Venezuelan presidential election reached 74,69% of the voter turnout in 2006, 80,20% in 2012, 79,65% in 2013.

interventionism. Consequently, middle classes emerged, and at the same time, the lower classes (working class and the most vulnerable citizens) were actively supported by broad redistributive policies.

The leaders established a new relationship with social movements, entering a loyalty dimension that favoured the logic of *divide et impera*. This approach was also used within the social bases that composed their electorate, often degenerating into “witch hunts” within the social movements through co-option and criminalisation of internal dissidents.

Finally, in foreign policy, populist left-wing leaders emerged with a new discourse on national sovereignty, mixing anti-imperialism, anti-capitalist, and anti-neoliberal rhetoric with a new Latin Americanist integration agenda. This agenda combined anti-U.S. rhetoric, anti-imperialism, anti-WTO, anti-IMF, anti-Free Trade Agreements, and anti-NATO policies, and the creation of an alternative regional/global order. However, deep contradictions also emerged from this perspective.

Their hegemony in Latin America corresponded with the Commodities Consensus (Svampa, 2012) boom and alongside the 2008’s global crisis. In fact, the end of neoliberal progressivism (Fraser, 2017) also highlighted some unfavourable aspects, contradictions, and tensions. In some cases, from the beginning, these governments showed incompatible contradictions between checks and balances and hyper-presidentialism⁸. Messianism led to Caesarism, hyper-presidentialism, and authoritarianism. Economic growth and redistribution, in most

⁸ There is a strict connection between left-wing populism and hyper-presidentialism over the last two decades. Hyper-presidentialism is considered a degenerative element of Latin American left-wing populism, as it exacerbates the dominating power of the presidency over legislative and judiciary powers (Svampa, 2012).

cases, were not sustainable or long-lasting. Consequently, poverty and inequalities were not structurally defeated. By the contrary, they were condemned to return cyclically, towards middle and lower classes.

In this sense, the left-wing regimes failed to provide a long-term alternative to neoliberal hegemony. Gradually, neoliberalism was reestablished by other means: crises arose in Latin America, poverty, inequality, and unemployment rates returned, and public and private debts became prominent features of the crises (Gudynas, 2012). The peak of these crises was marked by hyperinflation, devaluation, coupled with corruption scandals.

c. Alternative Right (or Right Wing 2.0): Does It Have Anything in Common with Populism?

The Alternative Right appeared in Latin America with Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) in Brazil, the leadership of Nayib Bukele (2019-?) in El Salvador, the rise of Daniel Noboa (2023-2025) in Ecuador, and most recently, the election of Javier Milei (2023-2027) in Argentina. They are products of the reaction against the left-wing model, but also of structural crises, impasses, and violence.

With the decline of the New Left populist wave (2013-2018), the Alternative Right has emerged as a credible alternative, while left-wing parties and movements are now losing the battle of ideas (Stefanoni, 2022). Indeed, the left-wing has failed to provide an alternative agenda, unable to renew its political and economic proposals for the working class and popular sectors, both in the rural and urban sectors.

The left-wing is indeed incapable of “reading” social problems and generating long-term solutions in social crisis scenarios. This highlights the progressive governments’ limitations

and defects, as they are unable to implement even their minimal agenda. The left-wing's incapacity to communicate and successfully lead their reform plans further exacerbates this issue.

How did they lose hegemony? In the new battle of ideas, the Alternative Right seemed to interpret Gramsci's contributions on cultural hegemony more accurately (Stefanoni, 2022). To achieve this, the Alternative Right has promoted active social media activism, alternating between fake news and manipulation. The online radicalization and "*followers* democracy" contributed to an anti-establishment rhetoric and activism, establishing a new political language and tools.

Returning to Gramsci, the Latin American left-wing seems to have lost cultural hegemony. The Alternative Right has successfully defied left-wing hegemony by using social media and algorithms. They have also created a new political discourse and communicative language, while the left-wing has not structurally varied.

During the contemporary cultural "wars," the New Left is politically correct and conservative, seeking to maintain and preserve its status and comfort. In contrast, the Alternative Right is politically incorrect, disruptive, and heterodox: the right wing is punk, and the left-wing is puritan (Dudda, 2019, p. 13).

Their agenda promotes an unconventional discourse. Anti-feminism activism, known as the *manosphere*, has radicalized to include androphilia and *sexode* (Yiannopoulos and Donovan). On social media, they also favour anti-environmental activism and a discourse against the academic establishment, which they see as dominated by socialism.

The Alternative Right has managed to balance the wave of progressive governments by creating a new elite coalition. This has been achieved through a careful political and media

strategy, restoring power through legitimacy and communication tools. This contributed to the erosion of progressive consensus by positioning an anti-establishment right and anti-globalism conservative and reactionary rebellion.

The theoretical and philosophical roots of the Alternative Right can be found in anti-liberal liberalism, ultra-libertarianism, anarcho-capitalism, and paleo-libertarianism. By embracing these positions, the Alternative Right is revolutionary, while the left-wing is moderate: the right is punk, and the left is puritan (Dudda, 2019, p. 13).

In the Latin American context, the Alternative Right has its own specificity, given the long tradition of coups d'état and authoritarianism. Its leaders are staunch defenders of military regimes and dictatorships. Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei actively promote political revisionism (Brazil, Argentina), reevaluating the role of the armed forces and military regimes against socialism.

They also promote a nostalgic campaign for military regimes, apologizing for their mandates despite all their human rights violations. They also weakened human rights associations and often humiliated the families of the desaparecidos by justifying the dictatorship's violence.

In effect, the Alternative Right openly defended the tradition of Latin American military and legislative coups, which never ended: Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), Brazil (2016), Bolivia (2019), and Peru (2022). The far right in Venezuela and Colombia may justify political sedition and interventionism to "reestablish" democracy.

In foreign policy, these governments maintained a controversial and bipolar direction. Free-market and "democratic" values gave way to protectionism and support for dictatorship and authoritarian regimes. While U.S. hegemony is not a given, there is an ideological convergence bloc, the emergence of an

international reactionary movement and solidarity with Western, Eastern European, and U.S. counterparts.

d. New Progressive Governments Wave in Latin America:
New Left 2.0, Does It Fit the Populist Label?

Finally, we introduce a new wave of centre-left governments that have emerged since 2018. Is populism an analytical category relevant to the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Gustavo Petro, Luis Arce, and Xiomara Castro? We emphasise the differences between the first generation of progressive governments and the new wave of progressive governments.

In these cases, the charisma of the leader is balanced by the objective limits of their powers. First, narrow majorities and a belligerent opposition may produce an impasse and ungovernability, limiting their governance and social agenda.

Political and social polarisation tends towards confrontation, with coup threats and civil war invoked daily. The confrontation penetrates every political sphere, while power conflicts with the legislative, judiciary, and media lead to an attrition war that limits governance.

These governments also promoted redistributive policies and reformism with a social justice mandate; however, the global and regional context has entered a new crisis. Consequently, they are not completely able to implement their social reform plans.

They are not entirely populist, but they may use some populist “tools” to implement their reformist agenda, defying fierce opposition from the media, legislative, and judiciary powers. To consolidate their electoral consensus through a redistributive agenda, they tried to replicate the pattern of the Socialism of the 21st Century. However, the global context has

substantially changed, contributing to a loss of autonomy, and the heterogeneity of their coalitions does not support the minimal implementation of reforms.

Comparing the Socialism of the 21st Century and the new wave of progressivism, the latter is much more moderate and less disruptive. Paradoxically, the left-wing governments that have come to power in Latin America are much more orthodox in adhering to International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies and recommendations.

The cases of Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil confirm this trend, as do Mexico, Honduras and Chile. They are much more in defence of the status quo; they have lost the disruptive power that, in many cases, gave rise to their governments and strengthened their consensus.

In contrast, the Alternative Right is irreverent, post-modern, and relativist (Stefanoni, 2022), while the left-wing has become conformist, retrograde, nostalgic, conservative, polite, and moralistic.

In foreign policy, these governments promoted a non-alignment and alternative agenda in international relations by fostering a new regional bloc against the extreme right and reestablishing Latin American political integration. Human rights, environment, peace and democracy are key parts of their foreign policy.

The human rights and democracy clause of their foreign policy is controversial, as it is used instrumentally to promote their external agenda. These governments try to impose an alternative international agenda, distancing themselves from Nicaragua and Venezuelan “left-wing and revolutionary” governments. They seek a new political path by distancing themselves from Nicaragua and Venezuela, but this also provokes internal clashes with *vetero*-communist forces. The New Left is nowadays split in factions, between different positions such as

the São Paulo Forum, and the Puebla Group, the Claudia Sheinbaum-Lula-Petro bloc, and Boric's third way within the Latin American centre-left.

6. *Conclusions*

In this article, we focused on the structural causes and different perspectives of populism, considering it as an evolving concept. We created a theoretical and analytical framework that allowed us to establish differences and analogies with the “classic” populist definition. These analytical tools may contribute to new focuses on populist studies in Latin American studies by including contemporary debates on populism and emphasising its new features. We found that populism may converge with authoritarianism and fascism, so its boundaries are not previously and fully established.

We explored the structural causes of populism, comparing the “classic” populism of the mid-20th century to the new populist waves. During the 1930s-1950s, Latin American economies were growing, as were the 21st-century populist regimes. Populist regimes may have contributed to political and economic stabilisation. However, the 21st-century populist regimes tried to reestablish the economy and democracy.

We also focused on the democratic *malaise*, inherited disenchantment, and frustration with democratisation processes along with social and economic deterioration. Political, social, and economic crises in Latin America in the 1980s, 1990s, 2010s, and 2020s are the main interpretative keys that give rise to populist governments, both left-wing and right-wing. Populism might take advantage of electoral volatility and political polarization, providing a certain scale of stability through messianism and the extraordinary skills of the leader.

In the fourth part of this chapter, we analysed the four typologies of the contemporary populist waves in Latin American countries. We identified some analogies and differences, providing interpretative elements that may help distinguish each one. The non-dogmatic approach allowed us to analyse each one, considering the strengths and weaknesses of each typology, as well as controversial elements and contradictions.

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