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# An American Hugo Chávez? Investigating the Comparisons between Donald Trump and Latin American Populists

Charlotte Blair Harris

University of New Hampshire, Durham, harrischarlotteb@gmail.com

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**An American Hugo Chávez? Investigating the Comparisons between Donald Trump and  
Latin American Populists**

An Honors Thesis by  
CHARLOTTE B. HARRIS

University of New Hampshire

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Department of Communication

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AN AMERICAN HUGO CHÁVEZ? INVESTIGATING THE COMPARISONS BETWEEN DONALD TRUMP AND LATIN AMERICAN POPULISTS CHARLOTTE B. HARRIS, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Advised by: Professor Michael Soha

Following the 2016 presidential election of populist outsider Donald Trump, several think pieces throughout the popular press conjectured a comparison between Trump and former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Citing their populist rhetoric, brash and coarse sense of humor, and shared propensity for fiery tirades against the press, these articles made foreboding predictions about the status of American democracy. However, these short and sometimes anecdotally-based opinion pieces failed to acknowledge several important differences between Trump and Latin American populists like Chávez. This paper will address this gap in understanding by evaluating the comparison from an academic perspective. Through in-depth case studies of the political and social contexts of Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, and another Latin American populist, Rafael Correa, the paper will consider the veracity and implications of a comparison among the leaders. Furthermore, the paper will explore how these comparisons inform the intersection of government, media, and democracy.

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## Introduction

*“America’s Hugo Chávez.” “A Peronist on the Potomac.” “Pinochet. Chávez. Trump?”*  
*“Presidente Trump.” “El Donald.”*

These were just some of the headlines from various major news outlets in the months surrounding Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential victory, which seemed to suggest that Trump was America’s answer to a trend of Latin American strongmen with populist rhetoric and authoritarian tendencies. The comparisons attempted to offer an explanation for the great success and electoral victory of Trump, a celebrity businessman who had risen to political prominence in 2011 by questioning the veracity of then-President Obama’s birth certificate. It was a trajectory that perplexed many, particularly those with whom Trump’s message didn’t resonate. The comparison to Latin American populism was one possible explanation. The idea came from Latin Americans themselves, by foreign correspondent journalists, and also, of course, by those with no real grasp on Latin America’s political realities. As such, the articles ranged from sweeping, baseless generalizations about the often misunderstood region and its complex political trends to actually useful, informed arguments about the nature of the similarities.

On the surface level, the comparisons seemed to have at least some merit: both Chávez and Trump were undeniably populist, appealing to an aggrieved base of “the people” and promising to wrest power from the corrupt elite and restore it to the rightful citizens. They were also similar in that they positioned themselves as the sole arbiters of this restoration of justice. Their behavioral conduct, too, was case for comparison. Trump’s rejection of conventional presidential etiquette likens him more to charismatic but crass Latin American strongmen than it

does to the mostly demure and carefully curated performances of recent American presidents. The most distinctive similarity, however, may be the simultaneous use and abuse of communication channels, a technique perfected by the Latin American populist. TV-friendly antics paired with rages against the very networks that gave him a mouthpiece; Twitter rampages that read like a disorganized stream of consciousness – these were all hallmarks of Latin American populists long before Trump ever came along.

Still, these comparisons between Trump and Latin American populist leaders may obscure more than they enlighten. When it comes to presidents with such completely distinct political ideologies (Trump is a right-wing nationalist, whereas Chávez marries nationalist rhetoric with socialist economics), not to mention drastically different political contexts, equating them on the basis of some outward comparisons can hardly be considered careful, thorough research. And some of the articles' foreboding warnings that the U.S. will imminently dissolve into economic chaos and political ruin like Venezuela did following Chávez's leadership, is simply unsubstantiated fear-mongering and a sure conflation of association with causation.

The most useful result of these comparisons, rather than assuming that the outcome of authoritarian leaders in Latin America will also happen here in the U.S., may be that they force us to confront the limits of our own democratic structures and consider the potential threats of a leader who reads more like a foreign strongman populist than a tame establishment politician as usual.

This paper will address this missing academic perspective in the comparisons between Donald Trump and Hugo Chávez by analyzing the comparison from a scholarly standpoint. The

comparison between Trump and Chávez will be supplemented by considering another, more contemporary Latin American populist figure, Rafael Correa of Ecuador. In particular, this discussion between the similarities of Trump and Latin American populists will center on the common adversarial relationship with the media that each has cultivated. The discussion will begin by establishing a broad theoretical basis to build from. The paper will explore definitions of “the press,” summarize arguments on the role of the press in a democracy, describe the normative relationships between the media and the president and understand how deviations from this norm affect the efficacy of the political system. From there, the paper will apply this general concepts to specific case studies. The political and socioeconomic context of Venezuela and Ecuador helps to illustrate the rise of Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa, respectively, to political prominence and the potency of his message. The paper will examine Chávez and Correa’s actions once in power, particularly in terms of their relationship with the media. Next, the paper will discuss the various factors that played into the success of Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential election. Trump’s attitudes towards the media will be compared with those of Chávez and Correa.

The paper will then open up again to describing broader concepts that are related to comparisons of these populist leaders. A discussion of the role of the media will highlight the consequences of a compromised free press subject to rhetorical or legislative censure. A comparative analysis of liberal democracy and direct democracy highlights the differences in political structure between the U.S. and Venezuela and Ecuador. Finally, the concepts of populism, media and liberal democracy, are synthesized to assert that the parallels between Trump and Latin American populists are useful on the basis that they challenge us to consider



the structures that are integral to a functioning liberal democracy and how the attitude and actions of the president can compromise these structures.

### I – “America’s Hugo Chávez”: Musings from the Op-Ed Column

Following Donald Trump’s November 2016 electoral victory, the op-ed section of various newspapers was flooded with columnists clamoring to contribute their understanding to the rise of Donald Trump. One of the most repeated claims was that Trump was, in some way, “America’s Hugo Chávez.” The perspectives had varying degrees of legitimacy. Citizens of Latin American countries chimed in about their experiences living under a populist strongman, and although their writing tended to be more anecdotal than academically-informed, their perspectives provided a valuable native perspective. Foreigners from the U.S. and Europe also contributed, again with varying claims to authority. Some were justifiably familiar with the situations they spoke of, while others based their assertions on somewhat superficial interactions.

Rory Carroll, *The Guardian*’s longtime Latin America correspondent who had spent time in Venezuela’s capital during Chávez’s presidency, compares the former leader with Trump on the basis of their “extemporized mix of bombast, menace and bawdy humor, the symbiotic relationship with the crowds, the articulation of long-repressed grievances” (2016). He acknowledges the “profound differences” between the two leaders and recognizes that “the U.S. is not Venezuela,” a reality that some of the other opinion pieces hurriedly glossed over. Carroll’s conclusion that the U.S. may “unravel to tragicomedy” is perhaps dramatic, with too little credit to the strength of American democratic structures, but his perspective is anchored in actual encounters with the realities of the Chávez presidency.

Carlos de la Torre, a Latino sociologist and professor, uses a more academic approach to considering the implications of a Trump presidency in a December 2016 op-ed for *The New York Times*. De la Torre draws on his knowledge of the populist schema to equate Trump with Latin American populists like Chávez and Argentina’s Juan Perón. Additionally, he describes the expert use of communication channels on the part of these populists, whether through their own weekly TV shows or their animated Twitter feeds. (De la Torre even recalls being insulted by Rafael Correa on his national TV show – not once, but twice.) The implications according to de la Torre may be more subtle and gradual than a outright takeover of authoritarianism – instead, a slow strangling of democracy “by attacking civil liberties, regulating the public sphere and using the legal system to silence critics,” like what has happened in some Latin American countries, is more likely (2016).

Venezuelan TV screenwriter Alberto Barrera Tyszka’s op-ed for *The New York Times* is less academic in its rigor. He quickly skirts “beyond [Trump and Chávez’s] ideological differences,” to point out their shared “telegenic vocation.” Still, Barrera Tyszka does acknowledge that “the complexity of United States politics would make Mr. Trump’s journey to destruction more difficult” (2016).

The most dramatic, foreboding predictions comes from a *Washington Post* op-ed by Venezuela-raised economist Andrés Miguel Rondón, who cautions Americans to remain wary of the polarization that makes such extreme populism possible – and that makes it so dangerous to a healthy pluralist democracy. He offers some insightful thoughts, such as sharing that opposition leaders were only able to succeed when they, in a way, beat Chávez at his own game– genuinely reaching out and connecting with the same people that Chávez had charmed years earlier. But

Rondón’s final warning that “if the music keeps going... you will see neighbors deported and friends of different creeds and sexual orientations living in fear and anxiety, your country’s economic inequality deepening along the way” seems nothing more than fear-mongering (Rondón, 2017).

Ben Wofford’s 2016 *POLITICO* piece is based on a short trip to Ecuador in which he quotes several natives, and then generalizes their perspectives to represent the population as a whole. Wofford claims “scholars, writers, and public officials across the continent report that Trump is viewed with horror and fascination by many Latin Americans,” with little evidence aside from anecdotal quotes. Still, the quotes offer some insight to the cautious mentality of Latin Americans who experienced the same quick-tempered, easily-offended personalistic politicians in their own countries and recognize these traits in Trump.<sup>1</sup>

Still, no matter the relative quality of their argument, these articles still rely on generalizations, oversimplifications, and even stereotypes. Their catchy headlines conjure surface-level, cultural associations with the region: “Don’t Cry for Me, America” references the 1978 musical and 1996 film *Evita* telling the life of Eva Perón, wife of arguably Latin America’s first contemporary populist Juan Perón (Krauze, 2016). Similarly, an Economist article bearing the alliterative headline, “A Peronist on the Potomac” references the thrice-elected president, somewhat of an Argentine political icon and an easy point of access for Americans otherwise ignorant of Latin American politics (2017). Accompanying images depict a grinning Trump donning epaulettes, evoking a comparison to the Latin American strongmen leaders who rise to prominence through the ranks of the military (Krauze, 2016); Trump inexplicably portrayed as a

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<sup>1</sup> Even the Democratic National Committee seemed to clue into this awareness among Latin Americans of Trump’s similarity to strongmen leaders. During the 2016 election, they circulated a PSA to aimed at American Latino voters comparing Donald Trump to Chávez (Grillo, 2016).

likeness to Che Guevara aside an article about how he “tweets like a Latin American strongman” (Brassil, 2016); Chávez’s signature red beret emblazoned with “Make America Great Again” (Barrera Tyszka, 2016). They play on the common misconceptions or generalizations of Latin America as a place with political revolutions, military dictators, and general disarray. They gloss over the more complicated truths – like the fact that these political revolutionaries succeeded, in many cases, in their goal of liberating their people from the imperialist and exploitative grip of foreign countries and bettering the socioeconomic situations of their citizens, if only for a time.

Furthermore, the hasty comparison between Trump and Latin American leaders belies certain realities that make such a resemblance harder to believe. In a *Washington Post* column, Venezuela scholar Timothy M. Gill points out that Trump and Chávez have “entirely dissimilar backgrounds” (2016). Even their ideologies once in power differ – Chávez advocated for the political inclusion of traditionally marginalized indigenous perspectives, Trump is criticized for his failure to recognize racial and ethnic minorities (Gill, 2016). In a piece published by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), scholar John Patrick Leary takes issue with the idea that Latin America is suddenly to blame for the arrival of this “paranoid style of nationalism” in the U.S. He critiques this “error of eschewing political analysis for cultural generalization” (2016).<sup>2</sup> In these ways, rather than enlightening to the similarities between the U.S. and Latin America, the articles comparing Chávez and Trump obfuscate them. Chávez’s successes in addressing the Venezuelan people’s socio-economic grievances are given but brief acknowledgement; the repeated democratic victories and widespread popularity of many of the Latin American “strongmen” are not mentioned. On the other hand, by assuming that one

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<sup>2</sup> This article seemed to appease Chávez’s supporters – it was re-published by *Venezuelanalysis.com*, a left-leaning pro-Chávez site that, at one point, received funding from the Chávez administration (Wilpert and Kozloff, 2007).

outcome in Venezuela is a predictor of what's to come in America, the articles equate the social and political contexts of the U.S. and Latin America *too* strongly, ignoring the vastly different paths to liberal democracy. In either case, the anecdotal and opinion-based musings of the op-ed column fall short in providing anything beyond a surface-level analysis of the comparisons between Trump and Latin American populists like Chávez and Correa.

## **II – Identifying “The Press”**

In order to study the government-media relationships of Venezuela, Ecuador, and the United States as a way to explain the role of the press in politics, it is first essential to define what “the press” or “the media” are, and consider the relationship between the media and democracy. “The media” and “the press” are terms that indicate a diverse set of communicative bodies, each with distinct content, methods of framing, and modes of persuasion (Graber, 2003). These entities play an active role in creating and disseminating news creation in that they apply subjective perspective processes throughout the procedure of newsmaking. Therefore, the information delivered via the news media is filtered, evaluated, edited, and presented in different ways according to different interests. It is this active discursive process that shapes the messages communicated to us as “news.” As such, it's important to understand some of the influences over the newsmaking process. The most definitive influence on the newsmaking process is the organization and ownership of the press system.

The discipline of political communication characterizes several different models of press systems, which describe the formation, ownership patterns, and resulting style of news of different arrangements. The United States media was formed according to the liberal model,

which entails an early development of commercial for-profit media, limited state intervention, and standards of journalism centered around professionalism and objectivity (Hallin and Giles, 2004). The U.S. does have public broadcasting, but it receives much less funding from the government than public broadcasting in other comparable countries. The public broadcasting tradition is much stronger in European countries that have followed the Social Responsibility model, which seeks to separate or protect news from the market and profit-motive. However, a more recent trend sees many European countries with long and solid public broadcasting structures moving towards greater liberalization of media (Anderson, Downie & Schudson, 2016). In the U.S., news ownership is largely private, with increasingly large and powerful conglomerates controlling most of the news media, in the forms of newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations. This trend will continue indefinitely as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) continues to take a pro-free market, *laissez faire* approach to regulating media consolidation. Increasing consolidation for the sake of greater market share and higher profits has implications for the quality of news. High ratings of viewership—and the advertising dollars those viewers attract— is paramount, which can result in programming that has less regard for informing and more emphasis on entertaining. (Iyengar, 2007) Some scholars, however, contest the idea that media consolidation is correlated with a declining standard of news reporting (Graber, 2003).

Most Latin American countries' media systems, including Venezuela's and Ecuador's, are also structured under the liberal model. In fact, the U.S. played a central role in the development of Venezuela's media landscape during the post-Cold War period as a way to counteract the threat of communism. The Venezuelan media system developed in the American

model, driven by private investment and audience ratings as opposed to an idea of public service (Schwoch, 1993). This model was criticized for failing to satisfy educational needs of the population and represent the sociocultural landscape of Venezuela (Pascuali, 1995). Both Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa, in their respective presidencies, enacted legislation that designated the role of the media as a public service to citizens, although this had controversial implications of its own (see Section VIII).

### **III – Defining Populism**

The other paramount concept to understand for the purposes of this paper is populism. Although the phenomenon of populism has appeared in various forms throughout global political history, it has cropped up with increasing frequency in recent years in accordance with a growing trend of movements that invoke the discontent of a designated sector of the population as the grounds for a political revolution of sorts. These calls for anti-establishment politicians and hyper-nationalist policies invoke the disillusionment of the traditional political sector. It's a relatively new phenomenon in European and American political spheres, which have experienced largely stable, predictable politics for several decades.<sup>3</sup> Populism is not an ideology in itself, which is why it can describe political movements and players from across the ideological spectrum, from Donald Trump to Hugo Chávez to Bernie Sanders to Marine Le Pen. These ideologically distinct political figures and movements all fall under the broad umbrella term of “populism” in that they all adhere to the schematic division between “us” vs. “them.” All

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<sup>3</sup> That's not to say American politics hasn't still experienced manifestations of populism in recent history: Ronald Reagan's widely successful appeal to the American public was undeniably populist in nature; so was Barack Obama's grassroots movement that propelled his presidency. Even American political movements, like the Tea Party, abide by the classic populist schema dividing a sector of the “pure” people against a “corrupt” elite almost exactly.

manifestations of populism are characterized by a discourse that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” Populism posits that the answer to this dissonance is the fulfillment of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, which is usually interpreted and expressed by a charismatic leader. The potency of populism derives from the flexibility of its three core concepts—the people, the elite, and the general will,—which can be manipulated and reframed by various political actors in order to accomplish divergent political goals. In this way, it’s a malleable strategy that can be customized to fit virtually any ideological agenda (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This helps explain how both Chávez's leftwing anti-neoliberal socialism and Trump's rightwing tax-cutting nationalism can be called populist.

Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, and Rafael Correa all invoke the image of the “people” in reference to a broad class of common people with cultural traditions and popular values that have been ignored by the dominant “elite” culture.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to appeal to this group deemed “the people,” populist actors often integrate cultural elements that may be considered markers of inferiority by the dominant culture. Donald Trump uses coarse, sometimes objectionable language that appeals to his base of supporters because it defies standards of what he terms “political correctness.” (Chávez was also infamous for his crass style of humor, which often involved sexual innuendos.) Both Chávez and Correa invoked their mixed-race heritage to appeal to their country’s majority *mestizo* population, which had traditionally been ignored by

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<sup>4</sup> In other manifestations of populism, “the people” can also refer to the national community defined in either civic or ethnic terms. This type of characterization often occurs when populism adheres to nationalist ideologies, such as those seen in contemporary European populist phenomena. This rhetorical characterization would also apply to Trump’s “people,” in certain cases, such as when he attempts to divide the white citizens of America against the Latino “alien” immigrants in calls for border walls or tightened immigration laws.



establishment white politicians. Rafael Correa often addressed his constituents in Kichua, the indigenous language, rather than Spanish.

The elite are also characterized in different ways throughout populist discourse, either on a basis of power, class, and/or authentic nationality. Populists detest the political establishment and the economic, cultural, and media elite. These distinct factions are usually homogenized into one corrupt group that, according to the populist, intentionally ignores or defies the general will of the people.

In Latin America, populists like Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and their counterparts like Evo Morales of Bolivia, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil are legitimately “of the people” – they often have humble beginnings in middle- or lower middle-class families, have a mixed ethnic background, and rise to political prominence independent of the establishment. Due to these characteristics, they have a legitimate claim to identifying themselves as one of the people. However, once in a position of power, these populists faced a problem with sustaining the legitimacy of their power after characterizing those in power as the antithesis of “the people.” In other words, the populist leaders struggled with how to continue to identify themselves as one of the people while also sustaining and consolidating their power. In this predicament lies one of the intrinsic inconsistencies of populism – the anti-establishment stance of populists contradicts their need and ability to sustain themselves in power. Populists then resolve this contradiction and defend their positions of power by arguing that *real* power continues to lie in a shadowy establishment that they have the unique power to upend (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Donald Trump’s claim to being one of the people is not as clear as Latin American populists like Chávez and Correa. After all, Trump was born to a wealthy family, attended a

prestigious university, and jump-started his real estate career with a \$1 million dollar loan from his father (Thomas, 2016). He has proudly been part of the economic elite for decades. Still, his ardent followers see him as one of them. His identification as a common man is the result of a combination of a calculated performance and the appeal to cultural anxieties.

Trump first appealed to what would become his base of supporters through his participation in popular culture, in which he played the role of the “common man” (Andrejevic, 2016). Once actively campaigning, Trump played up his distinction from the establishment politicians by defying traditional expected behavior and etiquette, further aligning himself with the common people. He also identified with this base of people by vocalizing their fears and anxieties, blaming it on the cultural elite, following a narrative set by right-wing populist pushback movements like the Tea Party that assign the blame for America’s moral decay on the cultural elite that create increasingly provocative television and movies, and credit the overeducated social elite with creating a ridiculously out-of-touch culture of political correctness. (Frank, 2004). Finally, Trump distinguished himself from the rest of the elite on moral grounds, which allowed him to simultaneously distinguish himself from the elite and be uniquely capable to “drain the swamp.” This is how Trump, undeniably part of the economic elite, still can effectively call out the cultural and political elite as the cause of white working class distress in America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltswasser, 2017).

The third conception in a populist framework is the interpreted “general will” of the people that the political actor claims he will manifest. Additionally, the populist leader presents themselves as the only one capable of understanding this general will and enacting real political change. (Trump, in an unprecedented assumption of presidential authority, has declared quite

literally, “I alone can fix it” [Appelbaum, 2016]). In this way, populism simply replaces the interpretive structures of representative democracy with other institutions that attempt to do the same thing. Populism implies that the general will is transparent and absolute, which legitimizes an authoritarian approach to interpreting and executing that will. As such, the political approach of populism is decidedly anti-political – by homogenizing the desires of an inherently pluralistic society, populism leaves no room for dissent. (For more on the the relationship between populism and democracy, see Section X.)

For populists, power relations are maintained not just through material or tangible actions, but through an exchange of meanings, feelings, values, words, and perceptions that form an identity. Not only do populists make clear the tangible benefits to be attained from aligning with them, but they also emphasize the importance of shared values, aspirations, and patriotic feelings, the shared dissatisfaction with political elites and cultural marginalization. (Block and Negrine, 2017) This solidifies a bond between populist and followers, one that is almost impossible to dispel.

Many populists owe their appeal to their skill at identity construction and manipulation. The populist actor’s message is so relevant and delivery so effective that supporters feel compelled to align their identity with the cause. Chávez supporters became “Chavistas,” even crying “I am Chávez” during his 2013 street inauguration (Block, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Chávez made his goal of identification explicitly clear, even from his very first speech as President elect in 1998, where he proclaimed, “I am a little of all of you” (Block and Negrine, 2017). Trump supporters proudly wear campaign merchandise like the signature red “Make America Great Again” hat and

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<sup>5</sup> Prominent Hugo Chávez scholar Elena Block even coined the term “mimetization” to describe the process by which Chávez and his supporters con-substantiated into a singular symbolic identity (Block, 2015).

proclaim their identification with various labels like “#MAGAer” and even “deplorables,” co-opted from Hillary Clinton’s off-the-cuff remark of Trump supporters as a “basket of deplorables” (Cummings, 2016).

Additionally, the rhetorical power of populist actors involves the way they engage in the perpetuation of certain cultural myths, often co-opting and transfiguring them to fit their own agendas. Chávez invoked the image of Simón Bolívar, the nineteenth century military and political leader who helped liberate Venezuela and other South American countries from colonial Spanish rule. Chávez named his movement “Movimiento Bolivariano” and even legally changed the name of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Chávez would deliver his speeches in front of a portrait of Simón Bolívar, the revolutionary who fought for independence from Spain in a concerted attempt to associate his fight against U.S. imperialist powers with that of Bolívar (Kozloff, 2006). The rhetorical link instantly conjures visions of independence from imperial powers, closely aligning with Chávez’s own hopes to cut ties with modern day “empires” like the U.S. (Block and Negrine, 2017). Similarly, Trump’s mantra “Make America Great Again,” although it has tangible connections to a Reagan-era slogan, also works to evoke a mythic “before” that we must strive to return to. It is never quite specified what this period of American idyll that Trump longs to bring back entails, exactly, making it somewhat of a template onto which supporters can impress their own vision. Correa also utilized catchy slogans throughout his campaign and presidency that communicated his goals in a succinct and easily-digestible manner and conjured the image of Correa as a tough and relentless crusader for his people. Correa’s commercials ended with a decisive “*¡Ya basta!*” (“That’s enough!”), referencing his plan to go against the political establishment. Similarly, his other slogans, *Se*

*viene el correazo* (“here comes a whipping”, playing off the translation of Correa’s surname to “whip”) and the rally cry *¡Dale, Correa!* (“Hit ‘em, Correa!”), referred to Correa’s confrontation with elites. (de la Torre, 2010)

#### **IV – Populism in Latin America**

Populism has been successful in Latin American in addressing – or, at least, promising to address – the systematic ignorance of civil rights among citizens due to social, economic, ethnic, and status inequality. Latin America has an enduring and prevalent populist tradition owing to its high levels of socioeconomic inequality and cyclical transition to democracy, in which phases of democratic system are interspersed with periods of authoritarianism (Huntington, 1991). The unique trajectory of the Latin American transition to democracy is characterized by relatively weak democratic structures which leaves it vulnerable to periods of authoritarian rule. The weak grip of democracy also results in a political system that promises universal rights among citizens but often fails to deliver. This engenders a phenomenon in which citizens depend on local networks of patronage in order to access their promised rights. Populism succeeds by capitalizing on these tendencies of citizens to support a politician in exchange for the promised delivery of goods and services. In countries with weak democratic structures, too, populists often are able to easily consolidate their power in the executive, leading to democratically-elected leaders exhibiting traits of authoritarianism. The appeal of populism in Latin America comes down to the unique political circumstances in the region and the manner in which populism exploits these weaknesses to leverage popular support.

Whereas Western politics evolved to grant universal citizen rights and politician inclusion, Latin American politics perpetuates a distinction between common citizens and citizens deemed more important and granted citizenship rights and exception to the law. Universal rights are often in name only, and most citizens are left seeking for a “patron” who will help them access their right. This creates a system of clientelism, or “patronage,” in which local and regional politicians manipulate ordinary citizens by promising them access to rights in exchange for votes. Clientelism is the main mechanism for political control for politicians and access to resources for ordinary citizen. Patronage continues to be a pervasive political tool employed by leaders throughout democratic periods, in which goods and services are ensured to the public only in exchange for political support. Populism is an extension of the Latin American political practices of clientelism and patronage, in which social classes rationally support the leader who appears favorable to their short term interests. On a nationwide scale, populism in Latin America combines this distributive principle with identity politics, infusing their promises with rhetorical appeals that give symbolic recognition of marginalized communities. This powerful combination explains the widespread and persisting appeal of populism in many Latin American nations (de la Torre, 2010).

Other theories that attempt to explain the prevalence of populism throughout Latin America point to socioeconomic changes in the 20th century that led to urban masses yearning for political incorporation and susceptible to the message of a demagogic leader. This theory, however, ignores the high levels of social organization within communities, which use stratified networks of clientelism to access political and social rights. Populists, then, do not manipulate the passive and disorganized masses; rather, they exploit these existing clientelist hierarchical

networks in order to gain political support in exchange for distribution of material goods (de la Torre, 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Latin America has experienced three waves of different manifestations of populism. The worldwide reverberations of the Great Depression in 1929 hit Latin America during a period of increasing urbanization and economic reform encouraging industrialization, leading to a rise in political and social demands. Socialism and communism answered some of these, but populism's inclusive rhetorical identity of *el pueblo* proved more appealing than that of socialism and communism's "working class." The "corrupt elite" was understood as the corporate oligarchy that worked in alliance with foreign imperialist forces against the import substitution industrialization model that would benefit the domestic economy. In this phase of populism, "the people" was composed of *mestizo* community of peasants and workers, but not indigenous citizens or those of African descent. This phase of Latin American populism lasted until the onset of authoritarian regimes at the end of the 1960s (de la Torre, 2010).

Populism rose again in the early 1990s during the profound economic crises of Argentina, Brazil and Peru. Populist actors blamed the economic elite and their anti-free market policies for the crisis, going on to implement anti-poverty programs and neoliberal reforms to stabilize the economies and eliminate hyperinflation. The third wave of populism began with the Hugo Chávez's 1998 rise to power in Venezuela, spurring a leftist "pink tide" that then washed over Bolivia with Evo Morales, Ecuador with Rafael Correa, and Nicaragua with Daniel Ortega. This wave is characterized by an anti-imperialist, pro-Latin American (*Americanismo*) rhetoric,

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the idea of a socioeconomic "crisis" making a nation vulnerable to a populist leader relies on a concept too vague and oversimplified to explain the appeal of a populist leader. Populism has appeared in Latin America during times of relative stability, not just in times of crisis. This perspective of populism as something that only happens in response to a crisis reduces it to a solvable and transient phenomenon, when in reality it has proved to be far more pervasive and enduring than this explanation would suggest (de la Torre, 2010).

socialist tendencies that attempt to address socioeconomic inequality, and identification of a fraudulent establishment elite (de la Torre, 2010).

A discussion of populism in Latin American must also include mentioning the figure of the *caudillo*. The Spanish term *caudillo* describes a strongman leader who dominates political and social spheres. *Caudillismo* has dominated Latin American political spheres for centuries, and can be traced back to Spanish military leaders in the 19th century. Populist strongmen often manufacture a sense of urgency in solving society's perceived problems, which require bold and common sense action, not intellectualism, which allows them may defy traditional norms of presidential behavior and use vulgar or coarse language. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, the caudillo cultivates a connection with their followers through identification. Caudillos are masters at symbolic identification with their base of supporters, which they then use validate their claims to authority and legitimate sweeping political reform. (For more on populist identification with followers, see Section IX).

## **V – Hugo Chávez**

Hugo Chávez typifies the Latin American caudillo populist strongman. Following the traditional trajectory for the rise of populism, sociocultural and historical events in Venezuela in the late 20th century compounded a deteriorating public trust in government structures, making an outsider promising dramatic change seem particularly appealing. Venezuela has been a democracy, at least nominally, since 1958, when the country's main political parties signed the Punto Fijo ("Fixed Point") pact in an attempt to establish and ensure the sustainability of democracy in the country. The pact was widely recognized as a milestone in the development of



democracy in Latin America, but it was not altogether successful. Prevailing tendencies in the Venezuelan political climate like clientelism, patronage, and reliance on unstable oil revenues, weakened the integrity of the Venezuelan democracy. In the following decades, the public began to sense that these democratic leaders who were supposed to be looking out for the public interest were instead manipulating the system to their own benefit and answering to private interests. In addition, global economic crises and declining oil prices left Venezuela's political systems unable to fulfill the promises that they typically carried out using oil revenues. By the 1990s, public trust in the state of democracy in Venezuela had deteriorated to a great extent. Additionally, a third wave of democratization throughout Latin America had begun to promote a Rousseau ideal of direct democracy that validated legitimacy with electoral support. The declining authority of *puntofijismo* created a political vacuum to be filled by a personalistic leader who promised to restore democratic fulfillment of the people's wishes (Kozloff, 2006). That leader was Hugo Chávez.

In the early 1990s, Chávez was a low-ranking military officer who attempted an insurrection against the democratically-elected government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. The coup failed, but many Venezuelans remembered the image of Chávez that they encountered in the news coverage of the coup, a patriot who wanted to reform an increasingly ineffective government. Even though a failed coup d'état is perhaps not the most obvious path to political success, Chávez became a "messiah" of sorts for those who felt profoundly disenchanted with the political system. For many, the image of Chávez they remembered most from the coup was his televised proclamation, "Regretfully, for now, our objectives were not achieved." The words "*por ahora*" ("for now") became both a symbolic promise of hope and a threat for his political

enemies, providing the first link between Venezuelan's anti-political frustrations and Hugo Chávez, potential "savior" (Block, 2015). Chávez was imprisoned after the coup, but his base of popular support was already building, with many rallying for his release from prison.

Chávez's subsequent presidential victory six years later, in the 1998 elections, was the result of several convergent factors: the deterioration of living standards of most Venezuelans, the perception of corruption pervading the political system, the decay of authority and trust in traditional parties, the construction of important electoral alliances, and a dynamic and compelling electoral campaign. As a candidate, Chávez was able to tap into the expectations, illusions, fears, and emotions of the Venezuelan population disillusioned with the existing political regime (Canache, 2002).

Chávez ended up winning the 1998 presidential election with 56.2% of the vote, the largest margin won by any candidate in the nation's history, a testament to his compelling message and widespread appeal (Kozloff, 2006). In order to accomplish his grand electoral promises, though, Chávez had to use controversially authoritative measures. Within his first year as president, Chávez dismissed the National Assembly, introducing a new unicameral body of legislature, and introduced a new constitution. The new Bolivarian Constitution was criticized, though, as it appeared to erode several measures of checks and balances. The constitution increased centralized presidential control, extended the presidential term from five to six years, increased the involvement of the military in government, and created bodies of power that would promote direct democracy via referenda. There were large-scale demonstrations against the government protesting the constitution and Chávez was even deposed for a short period in an attempted coup-d'état (Kozloff, 2006).

Following the two-day coup, Chávez returned to power emboldened to consolidate his power even further. For the rest of his presidency, Chávez enjoyed relatively high levels of popular support. His “Bolivarian Revolution” introduced social and political reforms that reduced poverty in Venezuela by nationalizing private enterprise and channeling the revenues into social programs. For years, Chávez’s petrostate, which depended on the revenues from the country’s rich oil reserves, functioned as a prosperous government that, in accordance with a socialist platform, redistributed wealth across the population. Additionally, the oil revenues contributed to a regeneration of the country’s crumbling infrastructure (Kozloff, 2006).<sup>7</sup> In addition, Chávez granted civil rights to previously excluded minority and ethnic groups. On the other hand, however, Chávez’s brand of fiery rhetoric, tendency to criticize and subject his opponents to punishments, limiting of press freedoms, expansion of power in the executive and military, and the country’s ultimate unraveling once oil prices dropped and the backbone of the economy crumbled, has remained a potent contradiction to his relative successes.

## **VI – Rafael Correa**

The pink tide of left-leaning populists soon arrived in Venezuela’s Andean neighbor, Ecuador. Rafael Correa was a relative political outsider when he arrived on the scene to run for president in the 2006 elections. Apart from a short term as finance minister for President Alfredo Palacio from 2005 to 2007, Correa had little political experience or affiliations, and in fact was a university economics professor. He assembled a new political party as his electoral vehicle, and called it Alianza PAÍS (Patria Altiva i Soberana), which translates to “Alliance for the Proud and

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Chávez’s Petrostate proved incredibly precarious, plunging Venezuela into economic disaster with the decline of oil prices in 2008.

Sovereign Homeland.” Correa’s status as a political outsider in fact worked to his advantage in the election, as Ecuador’s electorate was growing increasingly disillusioned with the existing political schema. The country’s traditional political parties had decayed significantly since their height of power following the 1979 transition to democracy (de la Torre, 2010). In fact, the level of political satisfaction in Ecuador was so abysmal that the country had cycled through seven presidents in the past ten years, deposing three of them (North, 2015).<sup>8</sup> A dire lack of confidence in politicians and a perception of widespread corruption permeated the country. Additionally, an electoral system dominated by regionalism and clientelism encouraged party fragmentation in which regional political parties distributed patronage and looked after business and political interests of local elites, rather than the common electorate. Leveraging the fragility of the fragmented Ecuador political context, Correa’s Alianza PAÍS drew the support of several disparate leftist groups and made a formidable entrance onto the political sphere (de la Torre, 2010).

Correa’s message, like that of Chávez and Trump, resonated with a public that was becoming increasingly disillusioned with establishment politicians and parties. Traditional politicians had come to be associated with the corruption epidemic pervading the nation, so an outsider who was seen as “pure” and uncorrupted by the political establishment was particularly appealing. An economist, Correa had proved in his short tenure in a government position that he was ready to do away with the economic neoliberalism that had tightened austerity measures and contributed to high levels of poverty in the country. Correa also seemed prepared to address the social grievances that had disturbed Ecuador, like many Latin American nations, for decades.

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<sup>8</sup> Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahaud, and Lucio Gutiérrez were all forced from office by congressional opponents supported by mass protests against their unpopular economic policies or corruption (de la Torre, 2010).

Correa promised a “citizen’s revolution” in which he would revitalize the economy, redistribute wealth, and implement a new more equitable constitution. Correa positioned himself as an opponent of the system and the entrenched political class. He employed the term *partidocracia* (“particracy”) to describe how political parties, rather than individuals, controlled the political system, and promised a redistribution of political power to the people (de la Torre, 2010).

Correa’s election as president signified several things to the Ecuadorian people – for one, Correa promised a more inclusive society that recognized the legitimacy of indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians, historically discriminated and politically excluded groups. Additionally, Correa promised to end the neoliberal economic tradition that placed foreign interests over the national economy. Implementing a program of “21st century socialism,” Correa aimed to redistribute wealth by increasing monthly poverty assistance payments, restructuring housing loan systems, and reducing electricity rates. He promised to invest in infrastructure, education, and health with the money saved from the foreign debt he declared forgiven (de la Torre, 2010).

Correa spent the first few months of office delivering on popular campaign promises: doubling poverty assistance payments, increasing credits for housing loans, and reducing low-income households’ electricity rates. But Correa faced a stronghold of opponents who would block his path to fully achieving the Citizens’ Revolution he had promised. Congress was occupied by oppositional parties, with Correa’s Alianza PAÍS in the minority. Several rightist parties of Congress colluded to block Correa’s plans for a constituent assembly that would draft the new constitution Correa had promised.. In 2007, he issued a referendum on the establishment of a new constitution, with the motion receiving over 60% of the vote. With this Constitution, he arbitrarily replaced the Congress with a new National Assembly, with a majority of his party,

Alianza PAÍS, taking seats. Correa's closure of Congress drew criticism from national and international media who saw it as a step towards authoritarianism and who questioned the ethicality of Correa's aggressive self-promotional media strategy (de la Torre, 2010)

Correa's presidency was characterized by an adversarial relationship between the government and media and social movements, a weakening of opposition parties, and a concentration of executive power. Under the pretence of a populist "Citizen's Revolution," Correa was able to make sweeping reforms that bypassed democratic procedures. Correa's claim to manifest the will of the people justified these actions. Correa ended all of his speeches with the phrase "*¡Hasta la victoria siempre!*", evoking a sense of glorious struggle and dramatic revolution. The political atmosphere became polarized, divided into revolutionaries and the opposition (Riofrancos, 2017).

Still, by the time Correa completed his second and final term of presidency in 2017, it was widely recognized that he made many significant strides during his time as president and he was generally well-liked.<sup>9</sup> As promised, he had incorporated a systematic rejection of neoliberalism into his economic and social programs, and was successful in reducing poverty and income inequality and improving health and education. He reorganized an existing monthly cash transfer program for low-income families, the Bono de Desarrollo Humano, increasing the amount and number of beneficiaries. The Correa government spent almost double what previous administrations spent on health care and education. The country saw a reduction in poverty from 48% in 2007 to 33% in 2014. A massive public works investment transformed the country's highways, hydroelectric plants, irrigation projects and airports. Political participation saw an

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<sup>9</sup> Correa's government enjoyed an average approval rating of 66% between 2007 and 2013 before dipping to 43% during 2014 due to the plunge in oil prices and subsequent economic recession (Riofrancos, 2017).

expansion to poor sectors, and new collective rights were recognized in the 2013 constitution. Notably, the constitution included Kichwa (indigenous) cultural concepts, an expansion of rights for indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians, and the recognition of the rights of nature (Riofrancos, 2017).

## **VII – Donald Trump**

Both Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa recognized that the political situations of their respective countries' left the public amenable to an "outsider" presidential candidate. Declining rates of trust in the political establishment, foreign influences threatening the national way of life,<sup>10</sup> and little political change in decades created the perfect environment for a populist to thrive. The same could be said of the political climate of the U.S. during the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump, a billionaire businessman whose political involvement consisted of mounting a conspiracy theory that President Barack Obama's birth certificate was a fraud, saw the potential for success. There have been dozens of theories posited to explain how Donald Trump rose to the presidency in the U.S., but his success is best understood as the confluence of several factors.

Many have pointed towards the potency of Trump's message among the white working class, who were twice as likely to vote for Trump than for Clinton in the 2016 election (Foreman and Pollock, 2017). Blue-collar Americans, many of whom had historically voted Democrat, have moved far to the right in recent elections, especially in 2016. The reason for this shift is the

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<sup>10</sup> In Venezuela and Ecuador, this threat was the economic influence of institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, who were adamant on imposing austerity measures in the country that asphyxiated government spending and contributed to high levels of poverty. Both Chávez and Correa campaigned on the promises to do away with neoliberalism and take measures to redistribute the national wealth to the citizens, rather than to outside countries or foreign bodies

marrying of cultural “wedge issues,” like abortion, that mobilize passionately socially-conservative voters, with pro-business economics. The Republican party has succeeded in a decades-long strategy of styling itself as the party of “law and order,” which appeals to the white working class. Politicians who have adeptly utilized this tactic stand to benefit from the support of traditional Republicans – businessmen who vote in the interests of a unregulated free market and former Democratic voters who, due to religion or other social forces, vote in alignment with their cultural grievances. This marshalling of cultural anger to achieve economic ends is what some term “reactionary” or “backlash” style of politics (Frank, 2004).

Although this movement has been in progress for the last few decades – its beginnings can be attributed to a backlash of 1960s social progressivism – attention to the phenomenon has intensified since the 2000 election. The electoral divides among inland states who went “red” for George W. Bush and coastal and urban areas that went “blue” for Al Gore seemed to signify a divide in American political society. Pundits were quick to point out this supposed bifurcation of America and politicians took advantage of the apparent divide to highlight the differences between the “real” heartland voters of red middle America and the overeducated coastal elites that were disproportionately featured in the news but had in fact not determined the outcome of the 2000 election (Bush won the electoral college, although Gore was victor in the popular vote). This rhetorical characterization positioned the Bush-voting middle Americans as earnest, hardworking “real” people who were largely ignored by the media but who had turned out in droves to vote for a candidate that spoke to them (and, perhaps moreover, spoke *like* them). Meanwhile, latte-drinking, Volvo-driving coastal voters who were yet again out of touch with the interests of “real” Americans voted Democrat (Frank, 2004). At least, this was the



characterization offered by some of the media and by many politicians hoping to capitalize on this differentiation that appeared to validate an already existing perception.

This division between the “real,” pure and natural people vs. the corrupt, out-of-touch elite is a trope repeated time and time again as a justification for populist revolt. Chávez and Correa followed this script almost exactly. It’s a compelling narrative that gives these groups of voters a sense of vindication, of triumph over a corrupt political system that consistently ignores them. Furthermore, at least in the American case, it gave this group of people a sense of agency that was feeling increasingly undermined – by minority groups inching in on their dominant social status, by immigrants bringing diverse culture to their small American towns, by pop culture offering increasingly offensive products and programming to their kids, by society becoming more secular and less adherent to traditional values.<sup>11</sup>

Still, one social group and their cultural anxieties could hardly have been the sole factor that galvanized large sectors of the population to elect Trump. Broader political trends emerging in recent studies may shed light on the attitudes of American voters that motivated them to vote for a candidate like Trump. One study found correlations between support for Trump and views that align with authoritarianism. The Republican party, by positioning itself as the party of traditional values and law and order, had unknowingly attracted a swath of previously bipartisan Americans with the tendency to support authoritarianism. Authoritarian tendencies may be latent in people until a certain factor activates the expression of the authoritarian. Demographic and economic changes, largely due to immigration and the aftermath of the 2008 recession, in recent

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<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon and its relation to the popularity of Trump is supported by a recent Public Religion Research Institute Survey, in which voting for Trump was strongly correlated with indicated agreement to the statements, “Things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country,” and “The American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence” (Foreman & Pollock, 2017).

years activated these authoritarian tendencies, resulted in many Americans seeking a strongman leader who would preserve a status quo increasingly perceived to be under threat. The extreme nature of this group's fears, and their tendency to support force in response to perceived threats, would lead them to support a candidate who would react accordingly to the changing social terrain – even if it meant supporting actions and policies that would otherwise be considered unacceptable (Taub, 2016).

Additionally, the climate of the news media in America was ideal for not only the perpetuation of the sentiment of America as increasingly polarized, but also for an authoritative strongman figure to poise himself as the sole person able to address these grievances. The increasingly fractured U.S. media ecosystem has played a monumental role in perpetuating the tropes of a populist backlash. Far from the days of all Americans tuning in to get their nightly news from one of three network news shows, today's media environment consists of vastly divergent messages customized for practically every political leaning. The vacuum left by the disappearing hegemony of the guiding, objective and mild authority of, say, a Walter Cronkite, was quickly filled by, at best, highly partisan infotainment<sup>12</sup> and, at worst, outright fake news (Glasser, 2016).<sup>13</sup> A once-shared experience of truth and reality has given way to a menu of media offerings that read like a “choose-your-own-reality” menu. In a fractured and endlessly-customizable information ecosystem of filter bubbles and polarization, the simplest solution seemed to be a candidate that simultaneously affirmed your beliefs and promised to unilaterally address them. That candidate, for many, was Donald Trump.

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<sup>12</sup> A recent Pew Research Center study found that nearly 50 percent of self-described conservatives now rely on a single news source, Fox, for political information they trust (Glasser, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> In the final three months of the presidential campaign, the 20 top-performing fake election news stories generated more engagement on Facebook than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times* (Glasser, 2016).

The issue of political economy and media ownership comes to play here, as well. The ownership structure of U.S. media is largely private, and with revenues dependent on high advertising appeal, news often becomes a matter of what will garner the most views or clicks. In an increasingly diverse environment with high stakes of competition, media sources turn their focus on stories that sell in order to maintain their market share. The effects of this phenomenon can range from being relatively innocuous, like the increasing popularity of human interest stories throughout the news, to carrying concerning implications for democracy, such as the rise of extremely partisan and fear-mongering reporting. More sensationalistic coverage of issues like crime, corruption, and terrorism, lead to a society that is much more susceptible to the paranoid populist discourse. After all, the success of populist actors depends on their ability to create a credible narrative of crisis, which imbues their message with urgency and importance. The current U.S. media environment has practically done all the work for them in that regard.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the very character of Trump made for, quite simply, great TV and the profit-driven media was all too happy to benefit from the public's fascination with the Trump candidacy. His outlandish claims, his brash manner of speaking, his theatrical gesticulation at his boisterous rallies— it all kept the viewers tuning in and the clicks coming. CBS President Leslie Moonves, early on in Trump's campaign race, was quoted as saying, "This is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald" (Collins, 2016). It's estimated that Trump received an estimated \$2 billion in what equates to "free coverage" from media attention during his campaign. His 2016 candidacy was covered by the media more than

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<sup>14</sup> The one sector of the U.S. media system that receives public funding, and thus does not have to rely on sensationalistic tactics to attract viewers and advertising dollars, is the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The CPB currently receives federal funding which it then distributes PBS and National Public Radio stations. Under President Trump's proposed budget, however, federal funding for the CPB would be eliminated over a two year period, jeopardizing the viability of many PBS and NPR stations (Concha, 2018).

all other candidates combined, which, just by sheer volume, made his message reverberate the loudest (Andrejevic, 2016).

### VIII – Populists and Media

From the very start, then, Trump played a performance that the media couldn't get enough of. It's a role that populists like Trump, Chávez, and Correa happily take on. In a mediatized arena of politics, acts of speech and rhetorical styles are considered political tools just as much as concrete politics and actions. The brand of personalistic populism that Chávez, Correa and Trump exhibit thrives on the media stage, expertly using communication channels to convey their message and engage their base of supporters. They construct a "communicator state," or "mediactic presidency," in which they not only govern, but *perform* the act of governing (Block, 2015). The performance can be obvious, such as Chávez's and Correa's weekly TV broadcasts touting their achievements and demonstrating their presidential capacity, or less deliberate, such as Trump's natural penchant for TV-friendly antics.

Hugo Chávez was a master of the mediactic presidency. Shortly after entering office, Chávez instituted a weekly TV show, *Aló Presidente*, as a way of bypassing the mass media and reaching his constituents directly. He obligated the Cadena Nacional, a chain of national networks, to broadcast the show every Saturday, sometimes interrupting regular programming for up to seven hours. The show melded characteristics from talk shows, news reports, roundtables, and campaign rallies to form a compelling narrative that helped to promote the accomplishments of Chávez and legitimize his political project (Bolívar, 2003). As president, Chávez played the role of the nation's main storyteller. He knew the popular folklore and,

traditional music, and the *joporo* folk dance, all of which he proudly put on display during his broadcasts, which were designed to be entertaining and engaging to the common Venezuelan (Block and Negrine, 2017). Still, Chávez interspersed the entertaining portions of the show with diatribes against the opposition and vitriolic criticisms of the private media. The effects of the show were twofold: one, it formed a cohesive and impassioned group of followers; and two, it reinforced division and polarization between those who were with the movement and those who were not (Bolívar, 2003).

Correa also understood the power of perception and popular support in the path to electoral victories. Like Chávez, Correa and his media team devised a weekly radio and television program, *Enlace ciudadano* [Citizen's Link] in which Correa directly addressed his constituents, with the goal of keeping Correa's accomplishments at the forefront of the public's mind. His cult of personality was compelling to the average Ecuadorian: his trajectory from a middle-class *mestizo* family to Catholic missionary in the Andean highlands to rising to political prominence as finance minister was promise of the social mobility that many yearned for. The show was broadcast by more than 150 radio stations every Saturday morning for two hours. The filming of the show and its accompanying spectacle would ensure the otherwise slow weekend news cycle would feature Correa and his accomplishments prominently, earning Correa particularly important coverage in the Sunday newspapers. Like Chávez, Correa took the opportunity to demonize his opponents and promote polarization between those who supported his "Citizen's Revolution" and those who did not (de la Torre, 2010).

Although it seems unimaginable for a U.S. president to engage in such a borderline-propaganda type of broadcast, it may not be so far-fetched. Trump's official Facebook

page has launched a series called *Real News Updates* and *Real News Insights*, hosted by none other than Trump's daughter-in-law Lara. The shows, which feature a "parade of pro-Trump commentators," are intended to counteract the apparent "fake news" of the mainstream media. The episodes aim to cut through the "distractions" and "white noise" ostensibly present in other news broadcasts, according to a comment from Trump 2020 campaign adviser Mica Mosbacher. The veracity of many claims made on the show, which ends each broadcast with the definitive phrase, "That's the real news for today," is debatable (Blake, 2017). Although the clips garner at least 600,000 views, their reach is hardly comparable to the breadth of Chávez's and Correa's shows (Gomez and Parti, 2018). A more apt comparison, albeit via a different medium, may be Trump's Twitter feed, which reaches 54 million followers directly and many more indirectly from the news coverage it generates.

Trump's Twitter tendencies are akin to what Chávez and Correa did on their television broadcasts (and, later, their own Twitter accounts): delegitimizing the oppositional news media ("So much Fake News. Never has been more voluminous or more inaccurate." [3/26]), calling out opponents ("Crazy Joe Biden is trying to act like a tough guy. Actually, he is weak, both mentally and physically, and yet he threatens me, for the second time, with physical assault. He doesn't know me, but he would go down fast and hard, crying all the way." [3/22]), and, above all, broadcasting his supposed accomplishments ("Our country is doing great!" [3/26]) It is through his almost constant stream of tweets that Trump constructs identification with his followers, whether by invoking his signature slogan "#MAGA" or ceaselessly portraying an us vs. them binary between supporters and opponents. Trump has done away with the traditional

relationship the president maintains with the news media, bypassing norms to reach his constituents directly.

In a communicational government like that of Chávez, Correa, and Trump, there is a continuous appeal to the citizens' feelings, demands, and aspirations via dramaturgical performances that are often mediatized. The presidency becomes largely symbolic, involving the exchange of various emotional, ideological and cultural symbols to solidify power. In order to legitimate and consolidate their power, these presidents also must construct, identify, and then antagonize "the other," or, those that do not support their movement, engendering a polarized political sphere. The appeal of such a public and accessible rhetorical performance is that the citizens feel as though their needs are being addressed and that their government is transparent and trustworthy. Unfortunately, though, it's usually an illusion, with politics actually happening "as usual" even though the carefully calculated performance may indicate otherwise. Mediatic presidents are masters at sustaining this illusion.

This adept use of the media, while simultaneously declaring it an adversary, is the most potent point of similarity between Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, and Rafael Correa. It's a paradox unique to this style of president: while taking combative action against the media, like controversial media legislation limiting press freedom or characterizing critical journalism as "fake news," these presidents simultaneously depend on the very same media they aim to demonize to construct a symbolic hegemony that legitimizes their leadership.

Hugo Chávez enjoyed the support of the media throughout his candidacy, but his attitude towards them quickly changed once in power. In his first few years in power, Chávez was widely criticized for what many, including the private media, saw as overreaches of power. The private

media questioned Chávez's dismissing of the National Assembly and introduction of a new constitution containing measures expanding presidential and military power. Widespread popular dissatisfaction with his actions led to national protests and even a short-lived coup d'état. Chávez immediately blamed the private media.<sup>15</sup> The coup was obviously unsuccessful, lasting just 47 hours, but, from that point forward, Chávez cultivated an adversarial attitude towards the private media. It was his 2004 media legislation, however, that had concrete implications for the liberty of the Venezuelan press. Called the Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión ("Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television"), or Ley Resorte, the stated goal of the legislation was to establish the social responsibility of media in "promote social justice and contribute to the establishment of public citizenship, democracy, peace, human rights, culture, education, health and social and economic development of the nation" Botero-García, 2016, p. 53). Although it appeared to have legitimate motivations, in practice, the legislation put the government in charge of deciding what information was valuable to democracy and what was not, leading the way for censorship. The legislation was also controversial in that it designed a program in which the government could play a greater role in controlling and censoring the private media. By redistributing radio and television frequencies, the private mass media's domination was undercut and the landscape came to be dominated by small independent local stations. The stations were nominally independent, but had to align themselves with the political

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<sup>15</sup> Chávez was not actually that far off: it was widely reported that Gustavo Cisneros, a multibillionaire business and media magnate, bankrolled the coup. His channel, Venevisión, broadcast replaced its regular programming with nonstop anti-Chávez propaganda in the days leading up to the coup and refused to cover pro-Chávez protests following the coup. The president charged to replace Chávez, Pedro Carmona, had strong ties to free trade groups and pro-U.S. interests and it is suspected that the U.S., concerned with Chávez's plans to nationalize the country's oil industry, played a monumental role in the coup (Kozloff, 2006).



agenda and broadcast presidential speeches in order to be eligible for grants (Botero-García, 2016).

The Chávez administration continued to enact limits to media power throughout the duration of his presidency. In March 2005, the National Assembly passed an amendment criminalizing the use of media to spread false information with the intent of causing worry, fear, or anxiety, setting a legal framework for promoting intimidation and self-censorship. In 2010, a law was enacted that threatened sanctions for reporting that questioned “legitimately constituted authority,” leading to groundless arrests and accusations of defamation. (“Venezuela: Ever More Authoritarian,” 2016).

Like Chávez, Correa enjoyed the support of many media elites during his campaign, but began to encounter criticism once in power. In response, Correa launched an attack on his opponents, including rival politicians, business elites, and the mainstream media. Correa used his weekly TV and radio program, *Enlace ciudadano*, to attack his critics and delegitimize the private media. Correa characterized private media and critical journalists as “wigs,” implying a connection to the evil oligarchy to be defeated by populism. He labeled opponents mafiosos, savage beasts, and idiots and called their critical reports “journalistic pornography” and “trash.” Furthermore, Correa accused media owners of dictating news coverage beneficial to their commercial interests. This accusation was an attempt to delegitimize the mainstream news coverage, encouraging citizens to instead get their information from state-disseminated news sources such as his weekly radio show (de la Torre, 2010). Correa’s attacks against journalists and media appear to have been at least somewhat successful. In a 2016 study, just 49.96% of

citizens expressed reliability in journalistic credibility while 51.74% of Ecuadorians considered the media to be corrupt (Gehrke et al., 2016).<sup>16</sup>

In one of his major electoral victories, Correa passed the 2013 Ley Orgánica de Comunicación (Communication Law). With Alianza PAÍS in the National Assembly majority, the 199 articles of the law successfully passed in June of 2013 with slogans proclaiming “La palabra ya es nuestra,” (“The word is ours”) and “Democratizamos la palabra y terminamos con el abuso de ciertos medios” (“We democratize the word and end the abuse of media”). The law received mixed critical reception from the international community. Many praised the stipulation for frequencies to be redistributed in a way that strengthens localized community media, the improvement of the workplace conditions for journalists, and enhancement in the quality of national music, movie, and advertising industries. In another commendable move, Article 35 of the law gives national minorities (indigenous people and Afro-Ecuadorians) the right to inform in their own language and stipulates that all channels must dedicate 5% of their programming to these minorities, and thus be informed of their culture and traditions (Gehrke et al, 2016).

Some provisions of the law, however, have been criticized as means to threaten press freedoms. Some journalists saw June 14th – the date the law was passed – as a dark day for freedom of expression and protests called it the *ley mordaza* (“gag law”). A major questionable component of the Communication Law classified information a public service, leaving journalists liable to fines if they failed to inform the public about issues of public interest, which are decided by the government. Human Rights Watch warned that “the law services to present

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<sup>16</sup> This is in part due to decreasing credibility as a whole following Ecuador’s banking crisis of 1999 and 2000. Media outlets, many owned by the same conglomerates that owned banks, failed to inform Ecuadorians about the true scope of the financial crisis. Correa’s 2013 constitution actually addressed this, enacting a law that prohibited financial businesses from having any participation in the media (Gehrke et al, 2016).

the state version of the truth as if it were the truth,” Reporters Without Borders called the law “a clear attack on freedom of expression” and “a systematic campaign of demonization of journalists especially on private newspapers and radio stations” and the United Nations stated the law “contained elements that clearly go against freedom of expression and of the press” (Gehrke et al, 2016, p. 26). One provision of the law in particular, article 26, is seen as particularly detrimental to a free press. The article prevents what is termed *linchamiento mediático* (“media lynching”), which is defined as the repetitive publication of information that defames a person or institution. In practice, it prohibits journalists from criticizing politicians or institutions that reduce their public credibility. The sanction for cases of media lynching obligates the outlet to print a correction (Gehrke et al, 2016).

The effects of the Ley Orgánica de Comunicación are multifold, but the Ecuadorean press is generally recognized as having been stifled by the law. A Freedom House report declares Ecuador’s press “not free,” (Pallares, 2015), a Human Rights Watch report criticized Correa’s “criminal defamation prosecutions and administrative sanctions against critical journalists and media outlets,” (North, 2015), a Reporters Without Borders study found that the Superintendency mechanism of the 2013 Communication Law has cultivated a self-censorship among Ecuadorian journalists that discourages state criticism (Pallares, 2015), and a Fundamedios investigation found that 40% of journalists recognize self-censorship as a reality (Gehrke et al, 2016).

In addition to signing into practice the Communication Law, Correa has spent millions in legal actions against critical journalists and political cartoonists, suing newspapers for libel and shutting down social media accounts of critics. Correa has taken immense measures to punish

those who have expressed a negative opinion of him, in accordance with his 2013 Communication Law's "media lynching" provision. From 2012 to 2015, he has successfully procured a \$42 million criminal libel award against Ecuador's main opposition newspaper which published a critical political cartoon, forcing the cartoonist to "correct" his work. He has taken offense at satirical memes in which he is critiqued for exorbitant personal spending in the face of tightening austerity measures. He's publicly outed critics on Twitter, inadvertently directing his supporters to descend upon the account. In response to Correa's attacks against political cartoonists, the director of press freedom watchdog Fundamedios criticized that Correa had appointed himself "the owner of humor." A government initiative called Somos Más ("we are more") entailed the launch of a website and Twitter account aimed at targeting government criticism touted itself as a "community in support of the citizen's revolution" and featured the slogan "We are with you, comrade President" (Greenslade, 2015).

Unlike Chávez or Correa, Donald Trump has not succeeded in taking legislative action against the media. His attitude towards them, however, is unquestionably adversarial, and he has made several threats against the liberty of the press. In October 2017, after NBC erroneously reported that Trump had called for an increase in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, Trump raised the possibility of revoking the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] license of "NBC and the Networks" in a tweet. "With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!" His arbitrary capitalizations, unspecificity (what does he mean by "the Networks"?), and exclamatory quip ("Bad for country!") echo the characteristics of tweets from Correa and Chávez. That night, Trump tweeted again, this time making his threat more direct: "Network news has become so partisan, distorted

and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked. Not fair to public!” (Shields, 2017).

The tweet is dangerous in that, in part due to the nature of the medium, it offers no evidence, no context, and no realistic solution that would not involve a serious abuse of executive power, not to mention a violation of the freedom of the press guaranteed in the First Amendment. Indeed, Trump’s threat was met with significant pushback, with one Democratic member of the FCC tweeting succinctly, “Not how it works” along with a link to an FCC guide to broadcast regulation (Rosenworcel, 2017).

Although that was perhaps the most direct threat he has made, Trump has a history of suggesting legal retribution against critical press organizations. In March 2017, he wrote, “The failing @nytimes [New York Times] has disgraced the media world. [...] Change libel laws?” (Trump, 2017, March 30). Again, the tweet ignores both due process and executive authoritative capacity. In October 2017, in the midst of the Senate Intel Committee investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, Trump suggested that the committee look into “the Fake News Networks in OUR country to see why so much of our news is just made up-FAKE!” (Trump, 2017, October 5).

Trump’s tendency to threaten media sources with ambiguous suggestions of changing libel laws, senate investigations, and revoked licenses sets a dangerous precedent. Even lacking any context or evidence, Trump’s Twitter quips are surprisingly convincing for his followers. One could even say that Trump has “won” his figurative war against the media. An October 2017 by POLITICO/Morning Consult found that 46 percent of voters believe that the news media makes up stories about Trump and his administration. Just 37 percent do not believe the

media fabricates stories, and the remaining 17 percent are undecided. Among those who identify as Republicans and Trump supporters, the percentage of those who believe the media fabricates stories is much higher (Bump, 2017).

In an another October 2017 poll in which respondents were asked to answer whether they trusted their favorite news source or President Trump more, most Republicans said they actually trust Trump more. It's particularly interesting that these respondents said they trust Trump even more than their *favorite* news source, not just the mass media in general. Additionally, another question in the survey that asked if respondents felt Trump's tweets were informative or distracting found that Republicans and Trump supporters were more likely to categorize it as informative and effective. Finally, the respondents who identified as strong Republicans and Trump supporters (the groups that had previously said they trusted Trump more than the media and found his tweets informative) were more likely to believe Trump would be remembered as one of the best presidents (Bump, 2017). This highlights the significance of Trump's tweeting in the perception of him as president. It allows Trump, rather than evidence from journalistic reporting, to have the final say.

In a lot of ways, Trump fits the mold of your standard Latin American *caudillo*: a rejection of conventional presidential behavior and etiquette; a cult of personality that has entranced his most ardent supporters; a constant vilification of any opposition (Wofford, 2016). Trump's Twitter feed, at least, is in the informal, colloquial style pioneered by Latin American populists, which had previously been unimaginable in American politics. Barack's Obama's tweets, for instance, were characterized as "professional, diplomatic—and incredibly boring. Official communications in 140 characters" (Viñas & Alarcón, 2015). Compared to previous

politicians' forays into the medium—where their tone was reserved, professional, and impersonal—Trump's Twitter feed reads like a peek into his (somewhat disorganized) subconscious. Likewise, Chávez has been known to tweet about anything from a particularly delicious meal ("If only you knew the tremendous fish soup I had for lunch!") to his love for his *Patria* [Homeland] ("Viva Venezuela!!!!") to a particularly impressive *fútbol* game ("Qué golazooooo!"). Like Trump, a glance at his Twitter timeline shows a tendency to tweet multiple times a day and an affinity for exclamation points. Chávez was somewhat of a pioneer in the Twittersphere when it came to presidents, and many Latin Americans followed in his footsteps after seeing its effectiveness at reaching their populace directly.<sup>17</sup>

Rafael Correa's tweets are slightly more sophisticated than Chávez's exclamation point-ridden musings, but he also uses the platform in a comparable way to his populist peers. As of 2015, Correa trailed only the president of Rwanda as Twitter's most responsive president (Vogt & Goldman, 2015). He even engaged in somewhat of a Twitter war with American satire comedian John Oliver after Oliver parodied Correa's tendency to call out critics on social media – this was 2015, a time when such a thing was unimaginable in the U.S.. Correa lashed back – on Twitter, no less – with a characteristically infantile response: "*Demasiado ruido para tan pocas nueces.*" ("Too much noise for such little nuts.") (Tharoor, 2015). Nowadays, although no longer president, Correa is still active on the platform, even retweeting memes about his political opponents (Somos Más, 2018).

And although a similar Twitter feed is perhaps not anything to get concerned over, political scientists have pointed out that these tendencies are related to a certain brand of

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<sup>17</sup> Chávez even encouraged the population to directly tweet him their concerns, in a tremendous display of the type of liberal democratic structure-bypassing that he wanted to equate with his Revolution (Carroll, 2010).

ideology. Beyond having similar tweeting tendencies to these Latin American leaders, Trump may also fit into a mold of “post-fascist” populists, leaders who communicate with their publics without mediation from traditional filters. To this type of populist, the media is untrustworthy, and therefore citizens are better off trusting what comes directly from their leaders’ mouths (or, rather, fingers). The benefits of this direct communication between president and public are twofold: for one, it serves to emphasize their ‘outsider’ status while simultaneously downplaying the importance of traditional institutions like the press (Brassil, 2016). But without our politicians’ words being filtered through the critical lens of the press, that leaves it up to citizens themselves to apply a critical and historical filter to assess the validity or veracity of what we’re hearing, a skill that many people just aren’t equipped with. Indeed, journalism, as an entity, is defined as “newsworthy information and comment that is gathered, filtered, evaluated, edited and presented in credible and engaging forms.” In a way that benefits the public interest, good journalism contextualizes, investigates, verifies, analyzes, explains and engages (Schudson et al, 2016). In this way, it is essential for a rich public debate and informed electorate.

As can be seen in the presidencies of Correa and Chávez, this may present concerning implications for democracy. Correa and Chávez labeled the media in their respective countries, “trash,” “journalistic pornography,” (de la Torre, 2010) “coup-plotters,” “fascists,” (Simon, 2017); for Trump, the media are “fiction writers,” “a stain on America,” “the enemy of the people,” and, above all, “Fake News” (Rosen, 2017). When communication between president and people is unmediated by traditional filters like professional journalism (with its associated norms of objectivity and accuracy), the president becomes the sole source of information, information which may or not be based in objective truth and reality.



## IX – The Role of the Media in Democracy

With the grave consequences that come with the president being the sole source of information and truth, it's worth considering what role the media can play in sustaining a healthy and robust democracy. Ideally, the media is conceptualized as a forum for debate, a voice of public opinion, and a "watchdog" to monitor political behavior (Graber, 2003). As to whether it *does* these things all the time, the consensus is less clear. Media scholars point out that other values tend to dominate journalism more strongly (Francke, 1995). Still, some of America's hallowed stories of journalism have been when the media has played out its watchdog role to the benefit of the public (like in Watergate).

In contemporary politics, the media is often pointed to as a formative force of public opinion. It's true that media plays a role in influencing public opinion, but it's not simply a "magic bullet" or "hypodermic syringe" phenomenon as once believed, which analogizes the experience of media consumption as a direct transmission of message from the media to the receiver. Instead, there are a series of complex discursive exchanges that occur in the process of media interpretation that make it difficult to assess the precise role of media in forming opinion and influencing voting tendency.

Several new concepts help to illuminate the role of the media in shaping public opinion. The agenda-setting paradigm (Lees-Marshment, 2001) is one, in which mass media shapes people's attitudes and beliefs by directing the conversation that takes place, simply in the media's ability to select what is covered on the news and what is not.<sup>18</sup> The social capital theory,

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note the role of political economy and media ownership in this process, in that the interests—which is to say, the parent corporations of media conglomerates—that govern news coverage are often obscured from view but nevertheless play a powerful role in directing media coverage.

although it characterizes the influential role of the media as weak, underscores the importance of social interactions on new digital media channels in shaping attitudes (Newton, 2006).

The idea of mediatization explains the mass media as a potent and pervasive social force that can stimulate social change, modify our business activities, and influence our political practices (Schulz, 2004). Mediatization refers to the extension of the influence and impact of the media in all spheres of society and social life, particularly in politics (Block, 2015). Media-savvy populists thrive in this type of political climate that is increasingly embedded with mass media, as it allows for them to perform acts of speech and styles of rhetoric that carry more weight to the average voter than even their political platform.

Still, this mediatized sphere of politics involves a complex interplay of dialectical interactions that makes it hard to pinpoint a precise cause-and-effect relationship between media consumption and political outcome. Although the “media” has been much cited as the rise of Donald Trump (Kristof, 2016), and one can point to many examples in which populist actors like Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa channel support through the media, the media cannot be the sole force responsible for driving the rise of populism. Characterizing the process by which populists use the media to gain power mistakenly positions the media consumer—in this case, the voting citizen—as a passive figure. In reality, though, media consumers play an active role in engaging with the media content they see, particularly in our media environment today which is multifold and complex. Consumers can seek out virtually any viewpoint they can imagine and selectively interpret news events through various social and cultural filters (Block and Negrine, 2017). A savvy use of communication channels is only one facet of populists’ skill in identifying with disenfranchised, excluded, or aggrieved publics. Still, a free press is an important pillar for liberal

democracies, and the integrity of the press is an indicator of the viability of a country's democracy.

## **V – The Implications of Populism for Democracy**

Beyond the media's role in ensuring democracy, the strength of the structures of a democratic society are the most determinant factor in the health of a democracy. The populist appeal tends to be anti-political, anti-elitist, anti-establishment. This defiant attitude can be dangerous in that it legitimates the authority and the ability of the populist, acting under the guise of carrying out the "general will" of the people, bypass institutions of liberal democracy, instead promoting direct democracy to wager electoral successes.

The question of populism's effect on democracy demands an understanding of different conceptions of democracy. As a general concept, democracy is the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule. Most modern democracies, however, adhere to the tenets of liberal democracy, a political system that, while offering systems for political representation, also relies on institutions to ensure fundamental rights among minority groups with the intention of avoiding a tyranny of the majority. Liberal democracy is found in most western democracies that recognize the existence of a pluralistic society and attempt to find the balance between majority rule and minority recognition. Liberal democracies value individual freedoms, pluralism, political procedure, accountability, and checks and balances within government. Populism, though essentially democratic in its empowerment of the people, is at odds with liberal democracy in its rejection of pluralism. Although direct forms of representation and more direct participation in a Marxist tradition may align more closely with original Rousseauian democratic

intentions, the embodiment of the leader as the the will of the people may ultimately detract from the power of the people. Empowered populists often pose threats to the key components of Western-style liberal democracy such as civil liberties, minority rights, the rule of law, and checks and balances on government power. By devaluing these liberal democratic safeguards, populists delegitimize the opposition, leaving no room for an opposition to mobilize.

In this friction between liberal democracy and populism lies a paradox. On the one hand, the incorporation of previously-excluded sectors of the population through expansion of the vote and physical inclusion in public spaces of protest is a democratizing force. On the contrary, this activation occurs through movements that revere charismatic leaders that often exhibit authoritarian tendencies. Furthermore, the divisive discourse often put forth by populist leaders negates the diversity-tolerant practices of democracy.

Populists like Chávez and Correa, along with many of their Latin American counterparts, have condemned representative democracy as an artificial construction that claims to execute the *volonté générale* of the people but actually preserves an aristocratic form of power that leaves citizens as passive entities only periodically mobilized by elections. In Latin America, where political systems are built within a framework lacking strong liberal democratic institutions and with persisting political practices of patronage and clientelism, democracy sometimes looks closer to electoralism. Electoralism equates democracy to the electoral process, in which the idea of citizens having the ability to vote is considered the sole requirement of democracy. This deteriorates the quality of democratic institutions that ensure the political system from being compromised by a tyranny of the majority. A holistic conception of democracy includes not only free, fair, and competitive elections, but also the assurance of freedoms that make the political

experience equitable (freedom of expression, freedom of the press, etc.), a robust environment of information, and a set of bureaucratic procedures that ensure government does not function solely according to the whim of the voter (Dahl, 1971). In an electoralist “democracy,” there is no room for pluralism or healthy political debate, because the opinion of the majority is assumed to be the will of the country.

Both Chávez and Correa promoted political systems in which liberal democratic safeguards and constraints were done away with and instead replaced with a more direct interpretation of democratic representation, the plebiscite vote. Significant political decisions, like the implementation of a new Constitution, or changing limits on presidential terms, are put up for referendum vote. This Rousseauian ideal of direct democracy involves an appeal directly to the people, bypassing important processes of checks and balances designed to avoid this tyranny of the majority. Democracy, in turn, rather than a political arrangement involving various institutions ensuring healthy debate, becomes an instrument, a tool for politicians to, essentially, get what they want. Essentially, decisions appear to be solely in the peoples’ hands, but in fact the leader is able to exercise great influence over the outcome of the election by campaigning for their desired outcome. Both Chávez and Correa were experts of this tactic, cultivating strong personal relationships with their constituents through various ends—particularly through the use of media—to associate voting for a specific outcome with support for their “revolutionary” cause and identification with their movement. This becomes a compelling narrative to take part in. In this way, democracy, rather than the adherence to liberal-democratic procedures and rites of law, instead becomes the unwavering support for a leader and the cause (de la Torre, 2010).

An inherent implication of such a system is that the leader sets out on a permanent campaign. This concept refers to the process of presidents and prime ministers implementing political marketing strategies throughout their term in order to mobilize public support and sustain their popularity. In a permanent campaign, campaign consultants including pollsters and media experts remain on board following the election and take on a key role in shaping government policy itself. The permanent campaign is often seen in administrations that employ a “plebiscitary presidency,” looking to consult public opinion directly, ignoring traditional governing bodies such as congress. The emergence of the polling industry and the ubiquity of broadcast media enabled leaders to engage directly with the public, going over the heads of Congress to make a case directly to the people. In this way, the communications and marketing industry helped in broadening executive power. It’s not surprising, then, that many contemporary leaders have been particularly well-versed in media strategy both during their campaign and their time in power. The recent wave of media-savvy Latin American populist presidents, including Chávez and Correa, all promised sweeping political reforms, which entailed winning key electoral votes once in power. They leveraged the media to mobilize public opinion and ultimately restructure their respective countries (Conaghan and de la Torre, 2008). This system of plebiscitary acclamation allows for the president to bypass traditional decision-making structures like congress and instead appeal directly to the people, campaigning for the outcome they want and putting the important structures of liberal democracy at risk.

What may be more indicative of potential damage to democracy, though, is not just the tendencies of elected leaders, but rather the broader attitudes that their election represents. Donald Trump’s election has risen concerns over a growing tendency of Americans to support

authoritarianism in response to perceived threats of social change. Some surveys indicate that the percentage of Americans who believe it to be essential to live in a democracy decreases with every generation. Warning factors portending shifts in political trends have become increasingly prominent in the American situation, according to some political science. The Mounk-Foa scale, developed by two political scientists, assesses the health of democracy in countries and indicates whether the democratic systems are at risk for failing. The factors assessed include a declining public support for democracy, an indicated public openness to nondemocratic forms of government, and a gaining prominence of anti-system political parties and movements. The scale can be particularly perceptive, even if countries outwardly still appear to have a strong grasp on their democratic practices. Venezuela, for example, continued to rate high on Freedom House's measures of political rights and democracy in the 1980s, but was already showing signs of democratic decline according to the Mounk-Foa scale. Concerningly, the Mounk-Foa scale now indicates signs of similar decline in the United States as it picked up in Venezuela prior to a turbulent political period in the country that resulted in the election of Chávez (Taub, 2016).

All this is not to say that Trump is the cause of the breakdown of democracy in the U.S., but rather that he is a symptom of a process that has been in motion for several years now. And still, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of one method and one survey can hardly be cause for panic. Another group aimed at evaluating the state of American democracy, called Bright Line Watch, found that voters from all political backgrounds were committed to protecting the institutions of democracy (Taub, 2016).

## VI – Examining the Validity of Trump-Chávez Comparisons

The comparison between Trump and Latin American strongmen leaders does hold up in several ways – Trump invokes populist discourse to legitimize his authority, embodies a *caudillo* strongman leadership style, and cultivates a simultaneous dependent and disdainful relationship with the media. In Venezuela and Ecuador, this combination had concerning implications for liberal democratic structures. Both Chávez and Correa were successful in carrying out important social and economic reforms to the benefit of their people, but they did so by bypassing important structures of checks and balances, rewriting constitutions, extending term limits, and installing members of their party in the majority. Additionally, they imposed controversial laws that limited freedom of the press and essentially silenced any critics. In doing so, they posed a threat to many liberal democratic safeguards that ensure pluralism and limit the concentration of authority.

However, Trump is hardly a mirror of Chávez. They have vastly different backgrounds and grounds for coming to power: Chávez is legitimately one of “the people” that he claims to represent, having grown up in a low socioeconomic stratum and being of mixed ethnicity. Trump, meanwhile, engages in complex identity negotiation and reconstruction in order to align himself with a base of supporters that he knows little about. And, although they may employ similar techniques of populist rhetoric and mediatic presidencies, their political goals couldn’t be more different: Chávez campaigned on an economic basis of nationalizing Venezuela’s industries to wrest them from the grip of globalist powers and divert the revenues back to the people and a cultural basis of representing the marginalized or minority perspectives that had



been ignored by the traditional politician. Trump, meanwhile, is practically a poster-child for globalist capitalist interests, and played on the cultural anxieties of a largely white sector of society who felt threatened by increasing diversity. Furthermore, the context of Trump and Chávez's respective countries are hardly homologous: Chávez was able to bypass structures of liberal democracy so easily because they simply weren't that strong in the first place, due to Venezuela's cyclical transition to democracy. Trump has already faced pushback for actions that appear to evade the political process, and it's hardly likely he would be able to accomplish such sweeping political action as did Chávez and Correa. These important differences indicate that a comparison between Trump and these Latin American populists solely based on some similar modes of conduct – or even Twitter feeds – is not entirely sound. Furthermore, such an offhand comparison absolves us of thinking critically about the status of our democracy, and what a president like Trump may portend in the context of American politics.

From an informed, scholarship-based perspective, we can see that things aren't as simple as the popular press pieces conjecturing this comparison make it seem. Still, it's unlikely that political thinkers will ever stop trying to understand the political phenomena of the U.S. in the context of other countries. And it's important to consider parallels between different countries because it highlights greater trends and challenges us to consider the realities in our own country. After seeing the outcomes of a personalist populist in Venezuela or Ecuador, perhaps we might be more vigilant in advocating for strong and sustainable structures of liberal democracy in the U.S.. We might be more wary of a national savior figure who promises to single handedly address all of societies' grievances – if only we turn over the reigns of control. We might even be

more inclined to think critically about the broader implications of something even as simple as an eccentric Twitter feed.

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