

Left-Wing Populists in Latin America?

An Analysis of the Chávez and Morales Governments *

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ABSTRACT

Albeit usual in Social Sciences, the concept of populism has multiple meanings despite no strictness in its applicability. Scholars have been sighting to improve its concept in order to apply it in the present context of numerous left wing governments in Latin America. There seems to be a consensus among these scholars that some governments are populists such as Venezuela and Bolivia, but the concept of populism continues without a single definition. Most criteria, however, if applied to European Governments labeled as Social Democratic, would also leave them to be seen as populists. This paper appraises their most institution-centered criteria to the formulation of a concept of a populist government. From the formulation of a common concept to the one used by these authors, we analyze Hugo Chávez's and Evo Morales' experiences in Venezuela and Bolivia. From the angle of their relation with the institutions, it becomes clear that both Chávez and Morales represent distinct phenomena, and that only the former could be considered a populist according to the adopted definition of the concept.

Keywords: Populism, institutions, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales.

Populism: an analysis of the concept and of the validity of its criteria

During the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of victories gained by left increased significantly in Latin American countries, prompting Lanzaro (2006) to paraphrase Samuel Huntington and brand this shift the “*tercera ola de las izquierdas*” (the “lefts’ third wave”). According to political analysts, this growth is associated with the failure of neoliberal policies adopted throughout the region during the 1980s and 1990s.

Due to the economic instability at the end of the 1970s and 1980s, the governments that came to power after this period prioritized macroeconomic adjustments and followed the measures recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to stabilize their economies. The result of adopting these policies was an increase in social inequality, poverty, unemployment, sluggish economic growth, and worsening standards of living for the poorest segments of the population (Castañeda 2006). In this context, the electorate chose to change the direction politics heading by electing left-wing candidates in various countries at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century.

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With the left back in power, the term “populist” once again enters the political lexicon. The concept of populism has been debated by social scientists for more than a century, but its overly broad usage makes it vague and imprecise, since it can be applied to any candidate who may win an election, whether he or she is from the left or the right (Di Tella 2007). To be of any use, the concept of populism has to be more than a “vague term that refers to leaders, policies, or popular governments that are disliked by neoliberal analysts and conservative journalists” (Guimarães and Domingues 2007:9). This problem has recently become extremely relevant due to the recent success of leftist candidates in Latin America who are winning elections in an increasing number of countries, or, at the very least, are becoming a viable electoral option supported by a significant portion of the population. In order to analyze this phenomenon, several authors (Castañeda 2006, Lanzaro 2006 and 2007, Luna¹ 2007, Panizza 2006, Weyland 2009) have espoused the idea that the Latin American left is composed of two strands²: one social democratic (in which rarely any other party besides the Chilean Socialist Party, the Uruguayan Broad Front, and the Brazilian Workers’ Party is included) and the other one populist.

The populist group – whose size varies depending on which analyst writes – is invariably presented with the Venezuelan Hugo Chávez as its emblematic example and the Bolivian Evo Morales as following in his footsteps. The advocates for distinguishing the “right left” from the “wrong left” (terms coined by Castañeda 2006), however, do not use as a starting point a well-defined concept of populism and also often do not present concrete proof that Chávez and Morales fit their loose criteria, nor justify their motives for classifying both within the same leftist government subtype.

This study seeks to 1) synthesize the criteria presented by the recent *literature on the two lefts* to define the concept of populism, 2) analyze the validity of such criteria while considering if they are also applicable to governments that are not regarded as populist, and 3) observe if the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and/or Evo Morales in Bolivia in fact fully or partly correspond to the criteria we consider valid.

We will not debate, in this article, the more sociological definitions of populism, such as Di Tella’s (2007). This study also does not include analyses that call irresponsible economic

¹ Luna states that the division between the two lefts is not the central focus for the analysis of the left in Latin America, but he does not discard the conceptual axis “social democratic vs. populist.” He adds a second axis, “tied to organized popular sectors vs. autonomous from them,” in order to get a more complete picture.

² Petkoff (2005) is an exception among the authors who state that there are two lefts, since he does not consider one of them to be “populist.” He emphasizes radicalism as opposed to moderation, with *chavismo* and *castrismo* being the most extreme and symbolic examples of the former. Though he sees affinities between Morales and Chávez, Petkoff does not discard the possibility that Bolivian MAS will become part of the “modern left,” and not “*castrist-chavist*.”

policies populist, since such a conceptualization would not be useful to discuss forms of government, only specific administrations, both leftist and rightist, and would also require a detailed examination of the economic policies implemented by the supposed populist governments, something the authors of the *theory of the two lefts* mentioned above do not undertake either.

The focus on populism in this piece is a political focus, the same one used by the authors of the *theory of the two lefts*. Generally speaking, all of them, or at least a considerable part of them, present three basic arguments regarding the components of populism: one political-ideological, one economic, and *one based on the government's profile*. In the following tables we can observe the components of populism according to the authors under analysis and an evaluation of these elements.

Table 1 – Political-ideological arguments

Elements	Criteria evaluation
A) Fragile or deteriorating party system (weakly institutionalized and highly volatile).	A) A party or movement cannot be accused of populism due to the environment in which it operates. It should be deemed so because of its inner workings.
B) Fulfilling a political void left by establishment actors.	B) Any new party will out of necessity oppose established parties and seek the votes of those who feel disenfranchised. If the new party is similar to the status quo parties, why should voters support it?
C) Lack of respect for the balance of powers, checks and balances, while promoting institutional changes designed to maintain power.	C) The literature is ambiguous since it mistakes changing the rules of the game – that is, using the rules to change them – for actually subverting them. One of the criteria that can be used to judge this concept of populism is failure to respect <i>the law and the constitution</i> , and not merely its use in a normative form which is considered undesirable or its modification through legal means.
D) Hegemonic inclination.	D) Every party has a hegemonic inclination, meaning they want to retain power and govern for <i>as long as possible</i> without interference from other parties,

	<p>whether they are office-seeking (due to the desire to exclude others from government offices) or policy-seeking (to avoid deviation in the policy-making from their ideal point).</p>
<p>E) Radicalized ideological polarization, antagonism towards the status quo, rhetoric based on the notion of popular sovereignty and the conflict between the excluded and the powerful.</p>	<p>E) Polarization is inherent to political struggle. As pointed out by Mungham (1996), “[British] parties display a clear preference for ‘attack’ or ‘negative advertising in their PPBs/PEBs [political <i>advertising</i>], especially in their televised broadcasts.”</p>
<p>F) Politicization of new identities and conflicts of interest previously considered “apolitical” (Panizza 2006).</p>	<p>F) Why populist? What Panizza describes is simply the way Cox systematizes the formation of <i>all</i> parties and <i>all</i> the issues: social cleavages are subject to political manipulation, and, for them to become politicized or vulnerable to be overtaken by party politics, it must be embraced by someone with the resources to compete with other political entrepreneurs, who seek to exploit some cleavages but not others.</p>
<p>G) Policies as something purely instrumental; a means to seek power (Castañeda 2006).</p>	<p>G) It is very difficult, analytically speaking, to determine if certain policies are an instrument to seek power or if power is an instrument to implement policies. There are many office-seeking or policy-seeking theories which are based on different premises and there certainly are actors who have different primary motivations (Laver and Schofield 1990). Utilizing this criterion to classify some governments as populist is very difficult to execute, yet is it commonly done, in an impressionistic and not rigorous manner.</p>
<p>H) Absence of a structured party that limits the president’s</p>	<p>H) Within the left, the absence of a party structure, that is, the existence of non-partisan personalism, can serve</p>

leadership (Luna 2007).

as a criterion for the differentiation between social democracy and populism. Still, such a criterion, if valid, should also be expanded to comprise the populists of the right.

Regarding part “A”, it is necessary to consider that if the argument were correct, all parties in institutionalized systems could never be considered populist and, by the same token, all parties in fragile party systems should be defined as such, including the adversaries of parties that are deemed populist.

In relation to part “C”, there are many examples in global politics, including in Europe, of institutional changes being made with the goal of obtaining electoral advantages and retaining power. In the post-war period, France adopted an electoral system that favored bigger parties where the large opposition parties were weak, and favored small parties where the opposition was strong. In 1981, Mitterrand changed the electoral system in order to reduce the number of seats occupied by the moderate right (Katz 2005). So, if this is a valid criterion to define populism, then it should be applied to all parties.

On part “D”, we should add that, when a coalition is formed, each party will try to pass on the costs to its partners, so as to cede as little as possible (Laver and Schofield 1990). In addition, the Swedish social democrats governed alone, without any coalition, without having a majority in parliament, from 1945-51, 1957-76, 1982-91, and 1994-2006. Can we call this populism?

Table 2 – Economic arguments

Elements	Criteria Evaluation
I) Nationalizations, contractual renegotiations.	I) Nationalizations and contractual renegotiations are elements of an economic policy strategy, and, as such, cannot be considered characteristic of a political definition of populism.
J) Changes in foreign policy, particularly a more conflictive stance towards the United States.	J) Foreign affairs also do not justify a populist label, mainly because the foreign policies to which the authors are referring specifically concern the relationship of Latin American countries with the United States. The “right left” would be, according to

them, the one which tries to maintain a good relationship with the United States and the “wrong” one goes against it.

K) High government spending supported by natural resources without taking into account a future potential price fall (Castañeda 2006, Weyland 2009). K) The left usually spends more than the right (Boix 1998, Garrett 1998) but should not be considered a populist because of that. The idea of reducing spending has more to do with the rival alternative – market liberalism – than a hypothetical drop in the price of natural resources in the future.

Regarding “I”, it is useful to point out that nationalization policies are strategies used by governments seeking to increase revenue. This mechanism was used in France during Mitterrand’s administration, and was recently adopted by Algeria, Russia, and Indonesia. It is important to draw attention to this phenomenon and show that it is not exclusive to regional dynamics, “not noticing that some of these developments are tendencies or regularities of a global nature” (Villa 2007).

Lanzaro himself (2006:17) notes that the widespread idea that populism is a specific type of economic policy is “part of the [neoliberal] ideological campaign.”

Table 3 – Arguments based on profile

Elements	Criteria Evaluation
L) Reverence of a mythical political figure regarded as the historical founder of the movement and benefactor of the working classes (Castañeda 2006).	L) The idea of a mythical figure has not reached a consensus among those who use the concept of populism and is, in fact, questionable as a criterion, but it can be observed with some degree of objectiveness.
M) Emphasis on personal charisma.	M) The emphasis on personal charisma is inherent to politics, especially in the current environment of campaign <i>mediatization</i> (Mungham 1996, Swanson and Mancini 1996). It cannot be, by itself, the defining trait of populism and neither it is only applicable to those branded as populists.

By evaluating the criteria of the authors of the *theory of the two lefts*, we notice that there are few elements that justify utilizing the term *populism* in a generic fashion to describe the current left-wing South American governments, even after excluding the Chilean, Brazilian, and Uruguayan cases. If we apply these criteria to the political behavior of European left-wing parties during their administrations, we find government behavior which should be considered populist, such as Mitterrand's France, the Swedish social democrats, and the Labour Party in Britain, among others.

Starting with the definitions of the authors of the *literature on the two lefts*, it is possible to organize a more rigorous concept of populism based on the acceptable criteria, which could be defined as follows: *non-partisan personalistic governments – without a party or with merely formal parties to support candidacies and their electoral base – who carry out reforms while disrespecting laws in effect and who frequently evoke a past political idol that is regarded as the movement's historical founder and benefactor of the working classes.*

Even so, such a concept would not fit with more classic definitions of populism. Conniff (1982) states that its main characteristics are: urban, multi-classist, electoral, expansive, popular, and led by a charismatic figure. The *Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth Century Social Thought* (Outhwaite and Bottomore 1992) and Gomes' (1996) definitions emphasize three points common to all populist systems: *1) The presence of socially mobilized masses with little or no autonomous class organization or a proletariat without class consciousness; 2) A leadership with a predominately upper or middle class background, within a context of hegemonic crisis in the dominant class; and 3) A form of charismatic connection between leaders and subjects whose appeal transcends social frontiers and subordinates institutions.* The first two elements are, surprisingly, practically ignored by the authors of the *theory on the two lefts* in their formulation of the populism concept, even though the first element is the one that most characterizes a populist government.

Di Tella's definition (2007:134) is similar to the one found in Gomes (1996) and in the *Dictionary*: "It is better to use the term populism to refer to political expressions that have the capacity to stimulate mass actions with little autonomous organizations, which oppose upper-class privileges, even when a sector of the elites [...] is leading them." This approach agrees with what Di Tella (1965:47) argued in earlier work:

It may be defined as a political movement which enjoys the support of the mass of the urban working class and/or peasantry but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors. It is also supported by non-working class sectors upholding an *anti-status quo* ideology.

According to the classic definition, populism originated in a transitional moment when industrial activity was growing, the urban working class was emerging but still disorganized,

and the influence of rural oligarchies was declining. Since it happened at a moment when the state was investing heavily in industrialization, classic populism, in Latin America, is closely associated with nationalism (Cardoso e Falleto 1986). According to Malloy (1977), populist governments sought to maintain a delicate balance between the different sectors of society during a moment of transition. Conniff (1982) agrees that the movement owes its urban character to the transformations the Latin American countries went through during the mid-twentieth century.

It is necessary to point out that, according to classic definitions, populism is a phenomenon characteristic of a certain historical period, during which all Latin American societies went through political, social, and economic transformations. Applying this concept to another context demands an exercise in adaptation, it cannot be simply transplanted. In fact, around the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin American society is at another level of development and undergoing transformation processes very unlike those it went through in the moment that the first populist governments were diagnosed.

A more consistent definition of populism, which incorporates elements of the classic definition and will be employed in this paper is: *personalistic non-partisan governments – without a party or with merely formal parties to support candidacies and their electoral base – whose charismatic leader is from an upper or middle class background, carries out reforms while disrespecting the rule of law and acts through a top-bottom mobilization of the masses with little or no autonomous organization; they frequently evoke a political idol from the past that is regarded as the movement's historical founder and benefactor of the working classes.*

Non-partisan personalism?

The government of Hugo Chávez is clearly personalistic and non-partisan. He was elected president of Venezuela for the first time in December 1998 with 62.46%³ of the votes, through the V Republic Movement (MVR), a makeshift party. The MVR was created by Chávez in 1997, during a period of high political instability with the possibility of elections being called for the following year, which ended up happening. Besides being elected by this kind of party, during the presidential campaign Chávez manifested his repudiation of parties and Venezuelan institutions. His victory represented a rupture in the country's politics, which

³All electoral data on Venezuela were obtained through the CNE – National Electoral Council, available at www.cne.gov.ve.

until then had been run by the traditional parties – AD, COPEI, and URD –, who had alternated in power since 1958, when they signed the pact of Punto Fijo.⁴

Chávez took office in 1999, at a moment when *partitocracy*⁵ was in decadence – with a high degree of party fragmentation – coupled with an economic crisis, high inflation and unemployment, 52.7% of the population living on less than a subsistence level income, a drop in oil prices, and low credibility due to corruption scandals. Chávez the candidate surfaced as an alternative to politics-as-usual in Venezuela during the 1990s, and his proposal was a rupture with the Washington Consensus and the refoundation of the republic, though he was not clear on how this would be done (Barros 2007, Marcano and Tyszka 2004). During the campaign, the then-candidate harshly attacked the dominant parties and the political order and promised to create a constituent assembly, to dissolve Congress, and establish a new institutional framework.

Marcano and Tyszka (2004:19-20) state that the Patriotic Pole, through which Chávez became a presidential candidate, “was not a political machine of great proportions.” It included the recently created MVR, as well as MAS, PPT, PCV, and MEP, all “very small left-wing parties, united around the personal figure of the candidate.” In December of 2006, Chávez himself, when defending the fusion of all the left-wing parties into the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), said he was worried about how focused allied parties’ members were in counting how many votes each one had received, since, according to him: “These votes do not belong to any party, these votes are for Chávez! Let us not divide the people” (Chávez Frías 2007:17).

The government of Evo Morales, on the other hand, is not by any means non-partisan. The MAS was conceptualized by Filemón Escobar in 1990, who led a political and labor indoctrination and ideological education program for the peasants of Chapare, located in the tropical region of Cochabamba, in the middle of Bolivia. The actual founding, under the name Political Instrument for the Peoples’ Sovereignty (IPSP), happened at an Assembly for the Peoples’ Sovereignty, which, in 1995, brought together the Unique Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers (CSUTCB), the Confederation of Colonizers, part of the Bolivian Workers’ Center (COB), and the Bartolina Sisa National Women’s Federation, among others. The National Electoral Court, however, refused to register it. Nevertheless, the coca leaf producers’ unions presented Congressional candidates in 1997, running for the United Left

⁴ Agreement to uphold democracy signed by the three major Venezuelan parties (AD, COPEI, and URD) at the end of the dictatorship.

⁵ For 20 years Venezuela had the most institutionalized of all party systems in Latin America (Amorim Neto 2002), in which the leadership of the major parties were able to exercise strong control.

front (IE), which brought together several parties led by the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB). The IE elected 4 representatives, all in Cochabamba, and among them was Morales, who made his debut in Congress as the most voted among all the candidates who ran for single-member districts in the country, with 70% of the votes. One of the parties that participated in the election through the United Left was the rightist MAS-U, a faction of the fascist Bolivian Socialist Phalanx, led by Añez Pedraza. After abandoning the IE, Añez transferred the legal status of the MAS-U to the social movements, formally presenting himself as their president to avoid another refusal by the National Electoral Court. In Congress the party officially switched the principles of the MAS-U for the principles of the Political Instrument for the Peoples' Sovereignty (IPSP) and began calling itself IPSP-MAS. Under Morales' leadership, the party was later renamed as MAS-IPSP, and later, it was shortened to MAS (Pinto and Navia 2007).

Therefore, as opposed to non-partisan personalistic candidacies, in which there is no party or in which they are merely a formal organization created to provide support to a specific candidate, MAS was created outside the electoral cycle as a strategy for the organized social movements, especially the coca leaf producers' unions. The party grew at an astounding pace and by 2002 it had become the second most powerful political group in the country, behind the MNR. The party had the second highest number of deputies and senators, and took Evo Morales to the second round of the presidential election, when he lost to Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in an indirect vote in Congress (CNE 2007). Three years later, Morales was elected president in the first round with more than 1.5 million votes (53.7%) and MAS became the majority party in the lower chamber and elected only one senator less than its main adversary, PODEMOS.

Traditional parties were considered primarily responsible for the crisis in a country with alarming social indicators – 76% of the population were considered poor and 50% were in extreme poverty, the employment rate was 13%, and 70% of those with jobs were underemployed. The traditional parties shrank and, due to their discredit, many of their politicians migrated to new parties, such as PODEMOS, which in practice replaced the ADN, and the National Unity (UN), which took MIR's place. It is difficult to blame Morales' leadership for popular dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, popular dissatisfaction was related to the changes that occurred in social movements linked to indigenous ethnic identity⁶, which stopped merely opposing the political establishment and began to design a strategy to win political power through democratic and constitutional means.

⁶ According to Gutierrez and Lorini (2007: 53), 65% of the Bolivians who live in poverty are indigenous.

After the June 2002 elections, the success of MAS led to a profound transformation in the correlation of forces, becoming the second political force of the country. It became the most powerful after the municipal election in December of 2004. According to Taborga (2005:15): “No government who wished to exclude MAS in the future could afford to work alone.” President Carlos Mesa had Evo Morales’ support in Congress for 14 months, until March of 2005. In exchange, Mesa went against the United States and diminished the intensity of the coca plantation eradication effort, keeping 3,200 hectares of cultivated land. Afterwards, when he decided to operate as messianic actor on the margins of political system, he thought he could operate without MAS, but he was wrong.

This political scenario should not be considered indicative of the existence of a populist and anti-system movement that strives to destroy governability, as suggested by Weyland (2009). What took place was in fact a normal coalition bargaining, which can be perfectly analyzed using the framework of Laver and Schofield (1990) in their study of the formation of European cabinets. In other words, what Taborga (2005) describes can be explained in the following manner: the MAS was during that period the pivotal party, meaning that the support of its deputies was essential for the formation of government majorities. Thus the MAS was able to make greater political demands in exchange for its support of the government; the party became crucial for the viability of a majority legislative coalition. The moment Mesa stopped making political concessions the coalition broke down and his presidency lost legislative support which eventually led to his downfall.

The MAS should not be understood as an anti-system party. Mayorga (2008:31) points out that one of the reasons that allowed MAS to achieve electoral success was the fact it incorporated a series of “moderate policies” at critical moments: it supported the constitutional succession in 2003 when Sánchez de Lozada resigned; it assumed a legalist position in the hydrocarbons’ nationalization process; and it facilitated an agreement between parties in 2005 to institutionally channel social demands through the Constituent Assembly and the referendum on autonomy, and to solve the political crisis by anticipating general elections. The MAS always negotiated when necessary and always asserted itself when the majority.

It is a mistake to consider that in politics there must be consensus on all topics, for plurality goes hand in hand with conflict. The best one can hope for is to turn the antagonism inherent to human relations into “agonism,” conflict that is organized by practices, discourses and institutions. The separation between “us” and “them” will not cease to exist, but “they”

should no longer be the enemy to be destroyed but rather the adversary whose ideas are to be contested at the same time they deserve the right to be defended (Mouffe 2000).

Disrespect for the rule of law?

At the beginning of his term, Chávez started implementing his reform programs, many of which undermined the existing laws and trampled over institutions. An example of this can be seen in the convocation of the National Constituent Assembly (ANC): since the Congress was still composed by a majority of opposition members in 1999⁷, he avoided submitting to Congress the bill that proposed the convocation of the Assembly. The president announced that there would be a referendum to decide on the matter and thereby gained popular support; by decree he called for a referendum in which voters would have to decide whether or not to convoke the ANC. “The referendum would not simply culminate in a YES or a NO regarding the ANC but also manifest itself with respect to the extension of the mission bestowed upon the ANC” (Amorim Neto 2002: 262).

In the constitutional referendum, YES received 71.78% of the votes therefore approving the convocation of the ANC in which the MVR would later obtain a majority. The Venezuelan Constitution, promulgated on December 20, 1999, presented significant progress with regards to human rights, and political and social rights (Alvarez 2002).

In February 1999, Chávez elaborated a legislative bill that would give him the powers to govern by decree in all matters administrative, monetary, fiscal, and sectoral – the so-called *Leyes Habilitantes*. Although Congress initially showed some resistance, Chávez was able to ensure the bill was approved in April 1999 unchanged. His power to pass legislation in key issues had therefore greatly increased (Amorim Neto 2002).

With the constitutional change, each popular consultation served as a way for the government to test its popularity. Chávez tried to transform the country into a “participative democracy” as *opposed* to the “representative democracy” which, according to Villa (2007:9), was inscribed into the Venezuelan “identity matrix”:

Therefore, in a stronger sense, the identity of the country was organized around two ideas: that Venezuela was a country that defended and promoted representative democracy both domestically and regionally (the Betancourt Doctrine was an expression of the normative content of this idea) and that Venezuela was a oil-producing developing country.

As explained by Coutinho (2006:817), the use of decrees by Chávez cannot be properly called illegal though it obviously undermined Congress. His policies are approved in

⁷ Chávez’s adversaries were able to anticipate the date of the legislative elections to one month prior to the presidential ones in order to prevent chavists from taking advantage of their leader’s popularity which would bolster their vote counts and help them achieve a parliamentary majority (Marcano and Tyszka 2004:158).

referendums largely because of the lack of credit of the opposition (which, by the way, is no more democratic than Chávez, as became clear in 2002 with the coup attempt and legislative elections boycott). The extreme polarization of the Venezuelan political scenario led to the emergence of the “*ni-ni*” movement – neither Chávez nor the anti-chavists. Coutinho (*idem*:218) makes a synthesis of the pros and cons of the Chávez government, compared to previous ones:

Despite the fact that Chávez carried out all these changes in a formally democratic manner and that the opposition is truly an oligarchy, contributes to a coup culture, and is favored by the private media’s support and by US consent, the new way in which power is concentrated unequivocally disrupted the balance provided by institutional checks and balances previously established in the country and also opened the way for violations of freedom through political censure and persecution. The popular and hegemonic character of the Chávez government interrupted a political model centered around economic and labor union elites, liquidating the plutocracy that ruled Venezuela for more than 40 years but it ushered in new problems as well.

At the same time the government promoted the mobilization and the political inclusion of a large portion of the non-organized population, the highly radicalized atmosphere it did this in placed it in a position of intransigence in relation to its opponents and any other anti-hegemonic instrument.

If at times it might seem contradictory to accuse Chávez of carrying out reform without respecting existing laws, accusing Morales of doing the same might be even more controversial. Presidential decrees were in fact used to implement measures the opposition was hostile to and to force it to vote in Senate bills that had already been approved in the Chamber of Deputies. The abusive use of decrees is a prominent issue discussed by political scientists in Latin America, yet even those who are critical of its use do not consider it a defining component of presidential populism.

Since the opposition in the Bolivian Senate, which holds a slight majority, has adopted a vote delay tactic for bills approved by the Chamber of Deputies, in which the government has broad majority, Morales has threatened to rule by decree in these situations (Mayorga 2008:35). The president also used decrees to redistribute the resources derived from the hydrocarbon reserves from the department level to the municipal level of administration. Moreover, the government encouraged the approval of the Universal Old-Age Income Bill, establishing that 30% of these resources (excluding those already to be spent on welfare and universities) were to be used as monthly payments for senior citizens. These two measures lowered the income available to the departments, which are where the most important government opposition comes from (Mayorga 2008).

In addition to the use of decrees, another event that could be considered at odds with democratic rules was the convocation of a referendum on the revocation of the terms of president and of department *prefectos*. This was a move made in the attempt to solve in the

voting booth the crisis between the State and the departments, although at the time there was no mention to this expedient in the Constitution (Mayorga 2008). However, this measure was not only approved by the Chamber of Deputies, in which the government is the majority, but also, some time later, by the Senate, with support from the PODEMOS (Cunha Filho 2008). The majority of *prefectos*, however, threatened to make use of “civil disobedience” and to ignore authority in case the presidential decree passed and the law reducing its income became effective.

Furthermore, the opposition in the Constituent Assembly spent a great amount of time discussing procedures so as to avoid the elaboration of a new constitution and ended up going beyond its one year deadline. Opposition activists and politicians blocked the entrance to the Gran Mariscal Sucre Theater for government members who in turn convened an assembly without the opposition in a military headquarter and there voted a draft of the constitution. One month later, in December 2007, the final draft was voted and, once again, the opposition withdrew its presence; without the quorum of two thirds of its 255 members the government reinterpreted its internal regulations and considered that the approval by two thirds of those present would be sufficient to pass the new constitution (Zucco 2008, Cunha Filho 2008).

Evo Morales used to be criticized by members of the Armed Forces for not having invoked his constitutional prerogative to call in the police and the Army and to decree a state of emergency in order to strike back at a “a moment when the opposition was clearly abusing its right to protest and was on the verge of violating human rights” (Cunha Filho 2008:12). This situation changed drastically after the “massacre of El Porvenir” on September 11, 2008, when 14 peasants were assassinated by gunmen during a pro-government rally. The murders were allegedly ordered by the then *prefecto* of the Pando Department.

Finally, towards the end of 2008, the government accepted to make changes in about one hundred different points contained in the constitutional bill, incorporating many of the demands of the opposition who then approved it (Cunha Filho 2008) before it was approved in a referendum held on January 25 with 61.43% of the votes.

The scenario described by Taborga (2005) and by Guimarães, Domingues and Maneiro (2005) shows that the crisis in Bolivia had started well before the emergence of the MAS and Evo Morales. The polarization of society, pitting the opposition from the richer regions of eastern Bolivia – notably Santa Cruz de la Sierra – against state centralism, and the dissatisfaction of social movements with the political classes had already been in place for decades. The party system – known as “pacted democracy”, in which Hugo Banzer’s ADN party, Paz Zamora’s MIR party, and Sánchez de Lozada’s MNR party successively replaced

each other in power and shared government posts (the practice of “*cuotéo*”) – was not in tune with social yearnings, leading to a wide gap between the “civil society” and the “political society”, the “separation between parties and society”, low responsiveness, and, ultimately, instability.

Top-bottom mobilization of non-autonomous masses?

According to Silva (2004: xxx-xxxI), the Chávez government originally represented a rapid process of top-bottom transformation along personalistic lines. This however, according to him, supposedly changed after the coup attempt backed by large segments of the Venezuelan business elite in 2002. These developments supposedly gave Chávez a glimpse of the “fragility of such methods” leading him to initiate “a broad movement to organize and transform the relationship between the State and the people by broadening and furthering participation mechanisms conducting to a ‘*gobierno de la calle*’.”

Despite its intent, this movement remained closely bound to and centralized around Chávez, for participation only occurred vertically. This has also been the case with other Chávez-led movements: the Bolivarian Revolutionary Army (EBR-200) that tried to topple government was renamed the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MBR) with the intent of allowing room for civilians but just a few months before the coup Chávez deliberately acted so as to guarantee the uprising would be entirely military. He did not trust civilians (Marcano and Tyszka, 2004) and among those excluded from the conspiracy were members of the Venezuelan Revolution Party, headed by Douglas Bravo⁸, who is very forthright concerning the politics of Chávez:

[...] that civil society was to actively participate in the revolutionary movement. This is precisely what Chávez did not want. Nobody, absolutely nobody. He does not want civil society acting as a concrete force. It is free to applaud him, but not to participate, which is a whole different thing. [...] nobody dared voicing an opinion when next to him. He does not accept dissent, or different opinions.

In the 2000 presidential elections, Chávez was reelected with 59.76% of votes. “Once elected, during the honeymoon period of the 1999 constituent assembly process, Chávez had the support of more than 80% of voters according to known surveys” (Alvarez 2008: 3). The reelection was only made possible through a modification of the constitution, since the 1961 constitution did not allow it. In the 1999 constitution, in addition to being able to run for reelection, the presidential term was expanded from five to six years and all mention of political parties was eliminated while the term “representative democracy” was avoided.

⁸ Quoted by Garrido, Alberto (2002). *Testimonios de la Revolución Bolivariana*. Mérida, Edición del Autor. *Apud* Marcano and Tyszka (2004:111).

“This new constitution created a pluralist, multiparty democratic political system that is based on popular vote as the fundamental instrument to constitute and elect political powers” (*idem*: 16).

In the 2000 legislative election there was a significant change in the composition of the Chamber of Deputies, consequently tipping the balance of powers in a new direction. The MVR got 44.38% of the votes for deputies in the National Assembly which along with the 6.11% received by other parties in the coalition (MAS, UPC, SI, IPCN, AA, MEP, GE, PPT) gave the government 50.49% of the votes, while the main opposition parties, AD and COPEI, respectively received 16.11% and 5.10% of the valid votes. For the first time since 1958 (which marks the reinstatement of democracy) the two main Venezuelan political parties achieved less than 50% of the seats in the National Congress.

In the 2005 legislative elections, the MVR elected 92 of the 165 deputies, that is, more than half of the deputies in the National Assembly remained in the government’s support coalition. The AD and COPEI respectively elected 33 and 6 deputies; the opposition continued its descent and lost much of its strength to protest against the government and its policies.

In the 2006 presidential elections, Chávez received the majority of votes (62.84%) which ensured him with the legitimacy needed to continue his projects and nationalist policies. After the reelection the president launched a project called “twenty-first century socialism”, which proposed a gradual process of change towards implementing socialism in Venezuela.

Six referendums were carried out during the Chávez government: the “National Constitution Consultation Referendum” (in April 1999), the “National Constitution Approval Referendum” (December 1999), the “Trade Union’s Referendum” (December 2000); the “Presidential Referendum” (August 2004), the “Revocation Referendums” (October 2007), and the “Constitutional Referendum” (December 2007). The president came out the victor in five of the six referendums. His only loss came in the most recent one.

The Constitutional Referendum was established with the goal of starting to implement the structural and institutional changes necessary for the realization of the “twenty-first century socialism project”. Its slogan was “*SI-gue con Chávez,*” a pun conflating the YES (*sí*) it was hoped voters would chose so that Chávez could stay (*seguir*) in power. The referendum proposed important constitutional and structural changes which, among others, would transfer greater powers into the hands of the president and limit some human rights, and civil and political liberties, something that would undermine the achievements of the 1999 Constitution (Alvarez 2008). By a slim margin the referendum’s proposals were rejected by voters: 49.29% voted YES and 50.7% voted NO.

According to Alvarez (2008), these results demonstrate a significant shift in popular support of Chávez compared to the results of the 2006 elections in which the president achieved a solid majority. Rejection of the reforms was higher in most densely-populated, industrial, and urban states.

The situation in Bolivia, however, is quite different. It is true that Evo Morales is able to mobilize the masses, yet this does not mean they do not organize themselves autonomously nor that mobilization occurs vertically. Indeed this was the type of mobilization which occurred in Bolivia in the period following the Revolution of 1952, when the MNR promoted the “tutored citizenship” model. This however does not apply to Morales and his party (Santoro 2007). Since there is no cooptation or party control over the social movement, Mayorga (2008:32) considers that there is an “unstable coalition” between them, meaning that support of the government might cease if the government does not meet their demands. In spite of the term used by Mayorga – it would have been more appropriate to term the government as responsive instead of saying that an unstable coalition was in place – his statement indicates that the MAS cannot be classified as a populist party. Mayorga also observes that the party holds open public consultations of its decisions before taking them. These consultations are held as government evaluation sessions and also take place in union assemblies.

The Crisis Group (2005:7), surely not a champion of the MAS, nonetheless provides an explanation of its behavior in relation to social movements that leaves little doubt as to their autonomy and ability to avoid vertical mobilization by the party:

Not easily, yet effectively the MAS coordinates the demands of the main social movements: peasants (CSUTCB), indigenous groups (CIDOB), coca leaf growers (*cocalero* federations in the tropical Cochabamba region), miners (mining coops), grassroots urban associations (Cochabamba water preservation committee) and neighborhood associations (FEJUVE in the town of El Alto). Lately, it has also attracted intellectuals and middle-class professionals.

For a long time social organizations in Bolivia have displayed dense organization skills, mobilization capacity, and political effectiveness. All these traits have increased as the recent strengthening of peasant and indigenous movements – MAS’s main sources of political support – has taken place (Mayorga 2008:31-2). Guimarães, Domingues and Maneiro (2005:5) have pointed out that in the 1990s there was a reversal in the already unsuccessful agrarian reform and in rural producer protection policies. This led rural unions to free themselves from the control both the military and the corporative system established after the Revolution of 1952 had over them, yet their organizational structure remained unchanged.

The cult of past heroes

Hugo Chávez always resorts to the symbology of heroes from the past. The most obvious example of this is his use of Simón Bolívar, the “Father of the Homeland”, who is almost religiously revered in Venezuela. Long before changing the country’s name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Chávez had created his rebel group called the Revolutionary Bolivarian Army (ERB-200) during the year of Bolívar’s bicentennial, 1983. According to Marcano and Tyszka (2004:61), Chávez has the peculiar habit of trying to point out that the date of certain events of his life coincides with those of historical events. During his imprisonment after the failure of the 1992 coup, he declared to the press that: “The true author of this liberation, the authentic leader of this rebellion is general Simón Bolívar. It was he, through his incendiary words, who has shed light onto our path” (Marcano and Tyszka 2004:119).

Bolívar is not the only summoned hero. Chávez’s revolutionary ideology is based on a “tree with three roots,” with Bolívar being one of them and Simón Rodríguez (Bolívar’s teacher and mentor) and Ezequiel Zamora the other two. Zamora was a federalist businessman who led a peasant insurrection whose discourse attacked the oligarchies. The plan for the 1992 coup was named “Ezequiel Zamora Operation Plan” and there are more than a few reports of situations in which Chávez privately stated to be a reincarnation of Zamora (*idem*:125). In addition to the “three roots,” another “hero of the past” of note is Pedro Pérez Delgado, also known as Maisanta. He was a military who at the beginning of the twentieth century opposed himself to the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez. Maisanta, allegedly, was the father of Chávez’s maternal grandfather, however this speculation has never been proven, and Chávez’s mother has never met him. The name of the Chávez’s electoral crew which was in charge of the campaign that prevented his downfall in 2004 was called “Maisanta Command” (*idem*).

In Bolivia, the MAS program, which consists of 10 commandments, is “loaded with emblematic historical symbols.” The commandment concerning its austerity policy and its battle against corruption and impunity is called “Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz” (Taborga 2005:40), in honor of the socialist leader who, as Minister of Hydrocarbons, in 1969 decreed the nationalization of the Gulf Oil Company properties, and was killed 11 years later at the behest of the dictator Luis García Meza (Cepik and Carra 2006). Another example is Supreme Decree 28’701, issued in May 2006, establishing the nationalization of the properties owned by oil companies in Bolivia. The decree was named “Heroes of the Chaco” in honor of those who perished in the war (1932 – 1935) (*idem*).

A leader belonging to the upper or middles classes?

Nobody considers that the fact in itself of belonging to an elite is what makes a political leader a populist. Generally speaking, this element is pointed out as just one of the traits of populism when combined with top-bottom mobilization of the unorganized lower-class social strata. As demonstrated, Chávez can be described as doing just so, whereas Morales cannot. Furthermore, Chávez's classification as a member of the middle class is ambiguous, whereas there is no doubt concerning Morales' low social standing.

Hugo Chávez has a humble background. He is the son of an elementary school teacher born in the rural Venezuelan plains and, like many other poor youths, enlisted himself in the army. As noticed by Marcano and Tyszka (2004:35): "Contrary to many other military institutions in Latin America, the Venezuelan army has always had a strong popular component. The overwhelming majority of its ranks are filled in by humble youths such as Hugo Chávez, who acquire the opportunity to ascend to the highest levels and to control considerable amounts of power." Chávez became part of an influential class in Venezuelan society. His success in the military opened the doors for his political career: he was a lieutenant-colonel when he led the coup attempt against the president Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992.

Evo Morales, for his part, is of native descent and was born in the Aimara indigenous community in the department of Oruro, and emigrated to Chapare in the early 1980s. He started his trade union career in 1981, as a secretary of sports and since 1988 has been reelected as executive secretary.⁹ Morales is since 1988 the main leader of the six federations of peasant coca plant growers in the Chapare region (Mayorga 2008:32, Crisis Group 2005:2).

Final remarks

It is important to make clear that the objective of this paper was not to defend or rebuke the pertinence of the concept of populism. This task would have required a taking into account a much broader discussion in which many others not mentioned here have been a part of: Francisco Weffort, Gino Germani, Octavio Ianni and Ernesto Laclau, to name just a few. This would go beyond the aims we set out to achieve.

Neither did we intend to champion a certain definition of populism: *personalistic non-partisan governments – without a party or with merely formal parties to support candidacies and their electoral base – whose charismatic leader is from an upper or middle class*

⁹ Not without some internal dissidence, for there are unionists that criticize the fact he assumes additional roles to that of president.

background, carries out reform while disrespecting the rule of law and acts through a top-bottom mobilization of the masses with little or no autonomous organization; they frequently evoke a political idol from the past that is regarded as the movement's historical founder and benefactor of the working classes. The formulation we have presented is simply an attempt to replicate the idea of populism presented by different authors that have defended the claim that there are two different kinds of left-wing political movements governing many Latin American countries: one of them being a social democratic left, and the other one, in which Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales would fall under, a populist left.

Our aim in this paper consisted of defining a plausible concept of populism *based on the criteria being adopted by authors of the two lefts*, and applying it to Morales and Chávez in order to determine if they would fit the description. Notwithstanding the strong bilateral ties that have approximated them, each one in fact represents distinct political phenomena that cannot be subsumed under the same label.

Only the Chávez government matches the criteria of being a personalistic and non-partisan one, of promoting top-bottom mobilization of the masses with little or no autonomous organization, and, perhaps, due to the fact his high social standing is not so certain since it derives from the high military ranking he later achieved, of being led by a charismatic leader originally from the upper or middle classes. Morales, on the other hand, is the leader of a party that represents social movements and organizations that are able to mobilize the masses autonomously. Furthermore, Morales' roots in lower social strata are clear. On the other hand, determining which class Hugo Chávez belongs to is not as clear-cut.

Both Chávez and Morales make use of referendums and ruled through decrees in several occasions, and have an ambiguous relationship with the rule of law; yet, the opposition does not show any greater commitment to democratic stability than them, meaning that, as a whole, an institutionalized political process in both countries has not been well established. Both presidents invoke political idols of the past, however this characteristic, which is present in Castañeda's (2006) definition, is rather an element shared by populist rulers and not what ultimately defines them.

Labeling the Morales government in Bolivia populist and affirming that he is following the steps of Chávez means ignoring a series of distinctive elements that set the case of Bolivia apart, notably strong autonomous social mobilization. The present concept of populism does however apply to Chávez, not surprisingly since it was elaborated based on elements authors of the *theory of the two lefts* identified in him. Whether or not these criteria are indeed valid – and whether or not calling Chávez populist is not an anachronism –, whether or not they are

applicable to other left-wing governments in Latin America, and whether or not it is harmful to democracy to subvert representation while balancing this subversion through referendum calls, are entirely different matters.

Appendix – Party abbreviations glossary

<i>Venezuelan Parties</i>				<i>Bolivian Parties</i>	
<i>Abbr.</i>	<i>Name</i>			<i>Abbr.</i>	<i>Name</i>
PSUV	United Socialist Party of Venezuela			MAS	Movement toward Socialism
MVR	V Republic Movement			MNR	Revolutionary Nationalist Movement
AD	Democratic Action			PODEMOS	Democratic Social Power
COPEI	Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee			UN	National Unity
URD	Democratic Republican Union			ADN	Nationalist Democratic Action
MAS	Movement toward Socialism			MIR	Revolutionary Left Movement
PPT	Fatherland for All			PCB	Bolivian Communist Party
PCV	Communist Party of Venezuela			MAS-U	Movement toward Socialism – Unzaguist
MEP	People’s Electoral Movement			IU	United Left
UPC	Patriotic Community Unity			IPSP	Political Instrument for the Peoples’ Sovereignty ¹⁰
SI	Independent Solidarity				
IPCN	Independents for the National Community				
AA	Farming Action				
GE	Emergent People				

¹⁰ That was the first name of Evo Morales’ MAS.

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