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More Alive than Ever: Lessons and Legacies of Twenty-five Years of South American Populisms

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Abstract. The question "What is left of the left-populist tide in South America ten years later?" is deceptively simple. Yet the truth is that answering it is more complicated than it seems. There are two sets of problems with that query. First, the terms of the problem are less obvious than what it seems at first sight. Neither "the tide", "left" and "populism" are self-evident in their meaning. It is unclear exactly when the tide ended, or even if it truly did. It is also unclear what exactly "left" and "populism" mean. Many people have argued that the governments commonly included in the populist tide were not truly left; also, the division between populists and non-populist leftist governments is not as evident today as it seemed to be twenty years ago. Added to that is the fact that one must reflect on the word "legacy" as well. Legacies can be defined as those elements which subsist even though the original phenomenon that caused them has ceased to be. But it can be hard to parse what element or dimension of today's political landscape is a legacy of these left populisms and not, say, of the neoliberal governments that preceded and followed them. On the other hand, however, these governments were durable and resilient, even more so than other leftist experiences in the region. In this article, we start by parsing the first set of questions, to wit: what was the tide, when it began and where it ended; what can be considered populist; and what can be considered leftist. Then, at the end, we reflect on the legacies of these governments from a political and a theoretical point. We will argue that populism is very much alive in the region, and that its study continues to be worthwhile. Moreover, populism as a political strategy is not only alive in the region, but has expanded to the rest of the world. The tide of left populism receded but it is clear now that, after twenty-five years of its start not only does left populism continue to exist, but that strategy has been widely adopted by the right and even by the far right. More to the point: non-populist leftist experiences are not necessarily more successful than the populist ones. Therefore, analysis and political practitioners worldwide still need to contemplate its possibilities.
Keywords: South American Populism; Pink Tide; Populist Right; Populist Governments.

[es] ¿Más vivo que nunca? Lecciones y legados de veinticinco años de populismos sudamericanos

Resumen. La pregunta "¿Qué queda de la marea izquierdista-populista en Sudamérica diez años después?" es engañosamente simple. Sin embargo, responderla es más complicado de lo que parece. Hay dos conjuntos de problemas con ese interrogante. En primer lugar, los términos del problema son menos obvios de lo que parecen a primera vista. Ni "marea", ni "izquierda" ni "populismo" son conceptos autoevidentes en su significado. No está claro exactamente cuándo terminó la marea, o incluso si terminó. Tampoco está claro qué significan exactamente "izquierda" y "populismo". Muchos argumentan que los gobiernos comúnmente incluidos en la marea populista no eran verdaderamente de izquierda; además, la división entre gobiernos populistas y no populistas de izquierda ya no es tan evidente hoy como parecía ser hace veinte años. A esto se suma que también debemos reflexionar sobre la palabra "legado". Los legados pueden definirse como aquellos elementos que subsisten incluso cuando el fenómeno original que los causó ha dejado de existir. Pero puede ser difícil discernir qué elemento o dimensión del panorama político actual es un legado de estos populismos de izquierda y no, por ejemplo, de los gobiernos neoliberales que los precedieron y sucedieron. Por otro lado, estos gobiernos fueron duraderos y resilientes, incluso más que otras experiencias izquierdistas en la región. En este artículo, comenzamos analizando el primer conjunto de preguntas, a saber: qué fue la marea, cuándo comenzó y cuándo terminó; qué puede considerarse populista y qué puede considerarse de izquierda. Luego, al final, reflexionamos sobre los legados de estos gobiernos. Argumentaremos que el populismo está muy vivo en la región y que su estudio sigue siendo valioso. Más aún, el populismo como estrategia política no solo está viva en la región, sino que se ha expandido al resto del mundo. La marea del populismo de izquierda retrocedió, pero está claro que, luego de veinticinco años de su inicio, no solo el populismo de izquierda continúa existiendo, sino que esa estrategia ha sido ampliamente adoptada por la

derecha e incluso por la extrema derecha. Más concretamente: las experiencias izquierdistas no populistas no son necesariamente más exitosas que las populistas. Por lo tanto, analistas y actores políticos en todo el mundo aún deben contemplar sus posibilidades.
Palabras clave: populismos sudamericanos; marea rosa; populismos de izquierda; populismos de derecha; gobiernos populistas.

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Introduction

The question "What is left of the left-populist tide in South America ten years later?" is deceptively simple. Yet the truth is that answering it is more complicated than it seems. There are two sets of problems with that query. First, the terms of the problem are less obvious than what it seems at first sight. Neither "the tide", "left" and "populism" are self-evident in their meaning. It is unclear exactly when the tide ended, or even if it truly did. It is also unclear what exactly "left" and "populism" mean. Many people have argued that the governments commonly included in the populist tide were not truly left; also, the division between populists and non-populist leftist governments is not as evident today as it seemed to be twenty years ago. Added to that is the fact that one must reflect on the word "legacy" as well. Legacies can be defined as those elements which subsist even though the original phenomenon that caused them has ceased to be. But it can be hard to parse what element or dimension of today's political landscape is a legacy of these left populisms and not, say, of the neoliberal governments that preceded and followed them. On the other hand, however, these governments were durable and resilient, even more so than other leftist experiences in the region. In this article, we start by parsing the first set of questions, to wit: what was the tide, when it began and where it ended; what can be considered populist; and what can be considered leftist. Then, at the end, we reflect on the legacies of these governments from a political and a theoretical point. We will argue that populism is very much alive in the region, and that its study continues to be worthwhile. Moreover, populism as a political strategy is not only alive in the region, but has expanded to the rest of the world. The tide of left populism receded but it is clear now that, after twenty-five years of its start not only does left populism continue to exist, but that its strategy has been widely adopted by the right and even by the far right. More to the point: non-populist leftist experiences are not necessarily more successful than the populist ones. Therefore, analysis and political practitioners worldwide still need to contemplate its possibilities.

First Question: What and When was the Tide?

The term "pink tide" is usually used to group together several South American presidents that came to power around the turn of the century[1]. Around 2009, two-thirds of the inhabitants of Latin America were living in countries with left or centre-left governments[2]. At the time, the near-universal turn to the left was seen as a shocking turn of events for a region that had been the poster child for neoliberal reforms only a decade before[3]. The pendulum swung from the widespread adoption of the technocratic, pro-market reforms of the so-called Washington Consensus to a movement towards greater state intervention with the goal of reducing economic and social inequality. Under these new leftist governments, the region saw a reduction in poverty and the improvement of social development indicators[4]. These governments also reduced social inequality substantially, no small feat in a region that has been characterised by a very high degree of inequality[5].

So, broadly speaking, the term "tide" refers to the period during which most of the governments in South America rejected the neoliberal program condensed in the so-called Washington Consensus and opted for a more interventionist state model implementing a more distributive set of policies. These governments favoured those at the bottom of the income distribution disproportionally, even over the middle classes[6]. The precise dating of the beginning and end of the tide is not easy to determine, however, and neither is the exact definition of what constituted their being "left". The complicating factor is that these governments, moreover, did not follow a preconceived set of policies. There was not a written down set of rules like the ones written down by John

1 See D. Feldman, "Globalization without Neoliberalism? Social Structures of Accumulation and the Latin American Pink Tide," in T. McDonough, C. McMahon and D. Kotz (eds.) *Handbook on Social Structure of Accumulation Theory*, London, Elgar, 2021; and D. Wajner and L. Roniger. "Populism and Transnational Projection: The Legitimation Strategies of Pink Tide Neo-Populist Leaderships in Latin America", *Comparative Political Theory* 1(30), 2022, pp. 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10037.

2 S. Levitsky and K. Roberts, *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. I.

3 See F. Panizza, *Contemporary Latin America: Development and Democracy Beyond the Washington Consensus,* London, Zed Books, 2009.

4 K. Roberts, "Social Correlates of Party System Demise and Populist Resurgence in Venezuela", *Latin American Politics and Society* 45(3), 2003, pp. 35–57, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2003.tb00249.x.

5 L.F. Lopez Calva, L. Felipe and N. Lustig, *Declining Inequality in Latin America: A Decade of Progress?* Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

6 G. Feierherd, P. Larroulet, W. Long and N. Lustig, "The Pink Tide and Income Inequality in Latin America", *Latin American Politics and Society* 65(2), 2023, pp. 1–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2022.47.

Williamson and promoted by the US government and the multilateral financial institutions, which became known as the "Washington Consensus"[7]. These prescriptions had framed the policy choices of the previous decade for the entire region. On the contrary, at the end of the nineties space opened for a higher degree of policy experimentation[8].

In particular, in some countries the left turn was conducted by outsider politicians that came to power with the support of newly created movements, while in others it was steered by institutionalised parties that were pre-existent to the left turn[9]. Because of this, it became common to distinguish between the populist and the institutionalised left. This might make it difficult to date the precise beginning on the turn to the left. Should we date the beginning of the tide to Hugo Chávez's victory in 1998, or to Ricardo Lagos winning the 2000 election in Chile?

The Chilean Partido Socialista, the Uruguayan Frente Amplio, and the Brazilian PT moved their respective countries to the left. All of them were established parties with decades of activism before winning the presidency. On the contrary, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador came to power almost alone, with newly created parties and young coalitions. Néstor and Cristina Kirchner are a partial exception because they ran for office under the Peronist banner; however, they barely won the 2003 election with only 22% of the vote. Juan Manuel Santos from Colombia was somewhat close to these cases, and Manuel Zelaya campaigned in 2005 in Honduras promising something similar. In any case, there is no doubt that, between the years 2000 and 2006, Latin America witnessed an unprecedented string of leftist democratic victories.

Populists and institutionalists shared some common goals and policies. All of them sought to put some space between South America and the US, who had been so closely aligned in the previous decade that the Argentine foreign minister had dubbed the connection "carnal relations". All of them shared a view of the state as a principal agent in social and economic development, and all of them pursued more active direct distributive policies, which involved conditional cash transfers, pension expansion, investment in health services, and other types of direct expenditures. But all these governments were free to engage in policy experimentation beyond this common core. Some presidents reformed their country's constitution and attempted to create new definitions of democracy, others worked within the constraints of the constitutional systems they inherited. Some governments pursued market-based politics, while others went for more classic welfare state universal policies[10].

The populist governments, in particular, were closely impacted by the ideological preferences and personalities of their original presidents. All of them came to power from outside the political elites, leveraging their opposition to the neoliberal order. They were all larger-than-life and colourful figures, far away from the image of a regular politician, and their words and acts dominated the political discussions of their respective countries. They were confrontational, relishing the antagonism with established powers, both nationally and internationally. They were also friendly among themselves, often appearing together in public and coordinating some policies in international forums. Moreover, all of them (Chávez, Morales, Correa and the Kirchners) came to power in the contexts of severe economic crisis and the collapse of the established party systems[11]. They had greater leeway to implement their programmes in the absence of organised opposition[12] and they made use of it. The mark of the populist left tide, then, was the close identification between ideology, policy, and the personalities of the leaders.

The populist left tide:

The date of the beginning of the left populist tide is easy to date: Hugo Chávez victory in Venezuela in 1998. After that, populists ascended in rapid succession: Néstor Kirchner in 2003, Evo Morales in 2005, Rafael Correa in 2006, Fernando Lugo in 2008 (one might add Manuel Zelaya from Honduras in 2005).

Beyond the personal closeness of these presidents, this class of cases fulfils the criteria for being considered a populist tide. With Harry Brown Araúz[13], we defined four criteria for ascertaining the existence of a wave by combining Huntington's[14] criterion of clustering similar cases in a short period, and Mudde and Kalwasser's[15] criterion of the existence of a similar model for the relationship between leader and people with two other ones: the presence of one figure that acts as regional leader and the availability of economic resources for promoting a regional project. These two last elements are, in our view, important to gauge the force of the wave, and its sustainability over time. As to the second criterion all of those presidents constructed similar models of

7 J. Williamson, "A Short History of the Washington Consensus", paper presented at the *From the Washington Consensus towards a New Global Governance Conference*, Barcelona, Fundación CIDOB, 2004.

8 K. Roberts, "¿Es posible una socialdemocracia en América Latina?," *Nueva Sociedad* 217, 2008, pp. 70-86.

9 M. Cameron and E. Hershberg, *Latin America's Left Turn,* New York, Lynne Rienner, 2010; K. Weyland, R. Madrid and W. Hunter, *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010; S. Levitsky and K. Roberts, *op. cit.*

10 J. Pribble, *Welfare and Party Politics in Latin America*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

11 K. Roberts, "Social Correlates of Party System Demise and Populist Resurgence in Venezuela" *Latin American Politics and Society* 45(3), 2003, pp. 35–57, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2003.tb00249.x.

12 S. Etchemendy and C. Garay, "Left Populism in Comparative Perspective (2003-2009)", in S. Levitsky and K. Roberts, *op. cit.*, pp. 283–305.

13 H. Brown Araúz and M.E. Casullo, "Democratización Y Neopatrimonialismo: ¿Hay Una Ola Populista En Centroamérica?", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 85(2), 2023, pp. 95–122, http://dx.doi.org/10.22201/iis.01882503p.2023.2NE.60984.

14 S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

15 C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

relation with their coalition of support. They sought to build a mobilised, heterogeneous coalition (which we can call "a people") by deploying a narrative discourse that explained the social ill and injustices as the consequences of the actions of an immoral adversary[16]. This allowed for the coalescence of a political identity based on those who had been hurt by the neoliberal reforms of the previous decades.

There is no question that the starting point of the populist left tide was Hugo Chávez's ascension to power in Venezuela in 1998. This ended up being a seismic event, which proved that the delegitimation of the traditional parties generated by the widespread repudiation of the neoliberal reforms of the nineties could open the way for outsiders. If a populist could win elections "from the outside" in Venezuela, which had been ruled by a party duopoly for four decades and was considered the most stable party system of the region,[17] then it could win elsewhere. Venezuela showed a blueprint for populist electoral success: neoliberal austerity implemented with the support of the mainstream parties, popular protests against neoliberal austerity, repression to the protests, and delegitimation of the established parties. This process can be called the "emptying of the middle"[18]. The emptying of the political middle opened the door for the populist discourses to take hold.

The Kirchners, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Fernando Lugo all came to power riding waves of popular dissatisfaction with the political "middle", that was seen as responsible for the economic, social, and political crises created by the implosion of the neoliberal reforms. These governments fulfilled the four criteria mentioned before for ascertaining a tide: all the cases were closely clustered in a short period of time and in close regional proximity; they all followed a similar template for the construction of a bond between leader and people; and, moreover, one of these leaders was willing to act as banner holder and public face of the wave, and he had resources to be used to prop up friendly presidents and movements. Chávez, the Kirchners, Morales, and Correa all shaped their public narratives around a narrative of elite damage against a virtuous people[19]; they all came to power in less than a decade; while he was alive, Hugo Chávez was happy to act as an informal coordinator and financier as the commodities boom of the early 2000s created a windfall that could be mobilised to foster cooperation. According to these four criteria, the left populist wave was the strongest one in half a century; it also was the longest one, and one with the power of achieving institutional reforms.

The end of the tide:

However, marking the end of the tide is less straightforward. The tide crested in 2008, with Fernando Lugo's victory in Paraguay. That year, Chávez, Morales, Cristina Kirchner and Correa were all at the height of their power and the election of Manuel Zelaya to the presidency of Honduras in 2005 seemed to signal the expansion of left South American populists to Central America. Left populism seemed to be gaining traction even in countries without a tradition of populist politics.

A possible argument could be made for choosing the ousting of Manuel Zelaya from power in a coup d'etat in 2009 as the beginning of the end, but the relationships between Zelaya and the South American populists were tenuous, and his ousting seemed like an isolated incident. In retrospect, however, the fact that the coup against him succeeded after the failure of similar attempts against Hugo Chávez in 2002, Evo Morales in 2007 and Rafael Correa in 2010 emboldened the anti-populist actors of the region. The impeachment of Fernando Lugo in 2012 (who was removed in a very irregular process which lasted only 48 hours) marked the starting point of the receding of the tide.

Hugo Chávez's death in 2013 marked the confirmation of the end of the tide. First, because he had been willing to play a role in sustaining and expanding the populist club, and he had the financial backing to do so. Nobody could replace him as the public face and source of resources of the movement towards left populism. But also because his successor Nicolás Maduro deepened the authoritarian elements which had been already present in Chavismo but had been contained by Chávez's charisma and connection with popular sectors. Left populism started to look suspicious. Evo Morales lost a plebiscite asking to be allowed to run beyond his constitutionally mandated term in 2014. Term-limited Cristina Fernández de Kirchner could not push her chosen successor to victory in 2015; Rafael Correa was able to do so and propel his vice president to victory, only to see him renounce him immediately after winning office in 2017. Correa left the country shortly afterwards.

Looking back at the populist pink tide, two elements come to mind. First, that even as the tide receded, the fact remains that this crop of populist presidents was durable by Latin American standards. All of them governed for a decade or more, in a region that is famous for the instability of their presidents, they were able to hold on to power by an average of twelve years. They also were able to achieve changes in their countries.

The second conclusion is that as the populist tide receded, so did the non-populist one, and in one case by similar methods. Lula Da Silva's successor, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached in 2016 on the thinnest of grounds and removed from office; a shocking end to a cycle that had brought fifty million people out of poverty. Michelle Bachelet's second government was besieged by accusations of corruption and populism. The Frente Amplio held on for longer in Uruguay, but was finally defeated in 2019.

After the tide ended, it seemed for a time that a new era of centre-right technocratic governance

16 M.E. Casullo, *¿Por qué funciona el populismo?*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores, 2019.

17 H. Kitschelt et al., *Latin American Party Systems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

18 F. Freidenberg and M.E. Casullo, "The Rise of Outsider Politicians in Latin America and Europe," *Monkey Cage Blog - The Washington Post*, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/16/the-rise-of-outsider-politicians-in-latin-america-and-europe/.

19 M.E. Casullo, *op. cit.*

was upon the region. The leftist governments were succeeded by a group of liberal or technocratic right-wing governments helmed by non-populist presidents like Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Lenin Moreno in Ecuador, Michel Temer in Brazil and Sebastián Piñera in Chile. They came to power with the support of the business elite of their countries and promised to eradicate populism once and for all. Those hopes, however, were short lived. Left populism proved to be more resilient as a political identity that people would have thought. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner chose to run as vice president in 2019 and defeated Mauricio Macri in the first round; a feat given Macri's credentials, his élite support, and his victory in the mid terms of 2017. Evo Morales chose to defy the negative results of the 2016 plebiscite and run again for the presidency; he was deposed by a coup d'etat in 2019. When Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linea fled the country, political leaders of the MAS were prosecuted and police forces engaged in repression of protests, killing supporters, many thought the MAS was finished. But after only one year, though, *de facto* president Añez had to call elections and MAS came back to power, with former minister of economy Luis Arce Catacora elected president.

In more recent years, two new leftist governments won elections using a populist strategy. Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the presidential election of Mexico in 2018. Xiomara Castro, Manuel Zelaya's wife, was elected to the presidency of Honduras in 2021. Moreover, AMLO maintained his popularity throughout his government and was able to see his chosen successor Claudia Sheinbaum elected the as first woman president of Mexico. President Claudia Sheinbaum has expanded on López Obrador popularity, and she currently enjoys an approval rate of eighty percent. While calling the Chilean Gabriel Boric and the Colombian Gustavo Petro populists would be an exaggeration, they two won elections by running as outsiders fronting broad coalitions that rejected established parties.

In conclusion, even if the left populist tide crested and waned, left populism continued to be a viable electoral and political strategy many years after the original defeat.

Second Question: What is the Left?

The consensus on the "Left Turn" of Latin America between 1998 and 2016 is so overwhelming that it might seem facetious to ask what, exactly, turning "left" meant. Yet answering what being left meant at that time is more difficult than it seems. Can "the left" contain Hugo Chávez and Lula Da Silva, Evo Morales and the Uruguayan Frente Amplio, Michelle Bachelet and Rafael Correa? All these governments were connected by a family resemblance more than by the common commitment to a rigid ideological menu. None of them came closer to implementing the full socialist program of eliminating private property, fully nationalising the economy and implementing one-party rule. Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner were friendly with Fidel Castro and supported Cuba in international forums, but none of them went for the whole package, not even Chávez.

Also, none of them came to power through armed revolutions or insurgencies. They all chose the electoral way. Two notable cases merit discussion in this respect. First, the fact that Hugo Chávez's first attempt at the presidency was through a military coup, attempted by him and a group of co-conspirators in 1992. After the attempt, Chávez spent two years in prison. He was released in 1994 and ran for the presidency in 1998. So, Chávez's example was instrumental in convincing other left and even far-left movements to choose the electoral route to power. This was the case also with Evo Morales and the Bolivian MAS. Even if Morales was a *Cocalero* (coca-grower) unionist and there were never indications that he was part of any insurgent group, the early configurations of the MAS included some radical autonomist indigenous groups who advocated for the dissolution of the Bolivian state and did not want to pursue an electoral strategy. One of the MAS founders, Álvaro García Linera, was one of Latin America's preeminent Marxists thinkers, had participated in an indigenist guerrilla movement at the end of the eighties. The controversy around the participation in elections was heated, and some organisations actually broke with Morales and left the MAS accusing him of reformism and betrayal when he chose to run for the presidency. The majority of the social movements and unions, however, embraced the new democratic strategy; including García Linera, who became one of the most important spokespersons for leftist populist political strategies.

The enthusiastic adoption of the democratic way to power made sense in an era in which the old definitions of leftist politics had been largely repudiated. During the sixties and seventies, there was one easy answer in Latin America for the question of what being a leftist means: doing revolutionary Marxism, Cuban style. This one-size-fit all recipe had fallen out of favour in South America even before the Berlin wall came down. The South American revolutionary movements of the seventies were seen as having failed in gaining mass support; they were seen as having been, without them knowing, functional to the rise to power of the brutal anti-communist military dictatorships of the late seventies. Moreover, the brutality of the military *Juntas* created the opening for an embrace of the language of human rights and the rule of law by large swaths of civil society and public opinion. Formerly Marxist thinkers embraced visions of social democracy and the Latin American left abandoned the writings of Marx and the Che and turned to reading Gramsci and Habermas. Most left-wing parties renounced revolution and embraced electoral democracy and the project of one-party rule was abandoned in favour of broader participation and inclusion. Class-based politics was complemented with a new interest in expanding gender, ethnic and sexual rights.

In sum, quoting Levitsky and Roberts[20], being "of the left" in this period became an open ended proposition. There was a common goal of lowering social inequalities (very much in line with Bobbio's[21]

[20] S. Levitsky and K. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[21] N. Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

definition of the left) but governments had ample leeway in trying different ways to achieve that goal. Hugo Chávez attempted to build the "21st Century Socialism" with extensive expropriations and nationalisations while the Chilean socialists remained committed to using market strategies for furthering social goals. Some of them legalised gay marriage or pushed from abortion rights; others were patriarchal in their understanding of gender dynamics[22].

And these governments succeeded in lowering inequality and ameliorating poverty. In fact, populist governments were more successful in achieving those goals than the non-populist left[23]. However, populist governments combined this broad commitment to lowering (not eliminating) inequality with two features that were unique to them. First, embracing antagonism and conflict, personalizing the fights, rejecting technocratic ideals of conflict-free social improvement. Second, they favoured the mobilisation of a committed base of supporters over party-building.

The antagonistic appeal of populism allowed these governments to construct a broad base of support and to achieve rapid and dramatic reductions in poverty and social inequality. However, it also generated polarisation and a wave of strong backlash. The opposition to these populist governments was so intense that there was a coup d'etat against Chávez in 2002, a secessionist attempt against Morales in 2007, and an attempted kidnapping against Correa in 2010. The severity of the polarisation and backlash was so strong that several analysts argued that the populist strategy was a mistake at the time, and that only a party-based, institutionalised left could avoid the pitfalls of polarisation and instability. However, as we shall see in the next section, the evidence for this prescription is surprisingly ambiguous.

Third Question: Who was a Populist?

Another complicating factor is that, in retrospect, the distinction between populist and non-populist presidents is not as clear cut as one might hope. Populists were supposed to be personalistic and antagonistic; moderates were supposed to be institutional and party-oriented. However, and now more than a full decade has passed from the pink tide's high point, it has become clear that differences between populists and non-populists were not as determinate as the analysis of the era would imply. In fact, the conclusion must be that pure populists or pure institutionalists were the exception and that the norm was impurity.

This was not at all the view at the time. Most political analysts classified the leftist governments as "populist" or "moderate". These were supposed to be dichotomous categories. Populist governments were defined as personalistic, with nonexistent or weak parties, with strong mobilisation and causing strong polarisation. The distinction, moreover, was normative. Moderate, party-based governments such as the Chilean Concertación, the Brazilian PT, and the Uruguayan Frente Amplio were praised as more stable and more durable[24]. Their reliance on more consensus-based and technocratic governance was supposed to win over median voters and business interests, broaden their base of support, reduce polarisation and build stability. Populist governments, on the contrary, were thought to choose antagonism towards business and elites and forgo consensus building, favouring conflict and mobilisation instead. This in turn was thought to cause polarisation, loss of support and, ultimately, instability.

The choice between populism and moderation was treated largely as a matter of personal and moral character. There were exceptions in the analysis, like Etchemendy and Garay's[25] comparative study of Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina, but on the whole not much thought was given to structural forces pushing governments in one direction or the other. That lent a moralistic bent to what was a political strategy. By and large the adoption of populism was seen as a purely moral flaw on the part of the leaders, who were seen as more ambitious, more personalistic and even authoritarian. However, one of the conclusions of studying the populist tide in South America is that, first, the commonalities between populists and non-populists were many, and also, that their fates were similar in the end.

The difference between one and the other was more a question of degree than of nature. It's true that the PT, the Partido Socialista and the Frente Amplio did not rewrite their country's constitutions, that they passed all of their reforms through regular legislative procedure and that they made efforts to stay in the good graces of their country's business elites. However, not all of the so-called populisms rewrote the Constitutions or reformed the Courts, for instance, and some of them (like the Kirchners in Argentina and Lugo in Paraguay) were almost reformist in their policies, so much so that it could be argued that they were not truly populists.

Two other elements bring populists and moderates closer. First, the idea that the moderate governments were party-based and less reliant on personal leadership was highly exaggerated. The Brazilian PT continues to be inseparable from Lula Da Silva; in fact, the failure of the transition of leadership to Dilma Rousseff (first) and then Fernando Haddad's loss to Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 only cemented Lula's stature. Lula, then 77 years old and a throat cancer survivor, had to run again in 2022 because nobody else had a better chance of defeating Bolsonaro. He still continues to be the only viable candidate against Bolsonarism. Something similar happened with Chilean socialism. The party could simply not replace Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, and went from being the dominant force in Chilean politics to being practically nonexistent in a few years. Even in 2025, voices continued to call for Bachelet running for president again.

But the thing that definitely connects the populist left with the moderate left is the reaction of the business élite and of the right towards both

22 S. Dingler, Z. Lefkofridis and V. Marent, "The Gender Dimension of Populism", in C. Holtz-Bacha, O. Mazzoleni and R. Heinisch (eds.), *Political Populism: A Handbook*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2021, pp. 345–356.

23 Feierherd et al., *op cit.*

24 See S. Levitsky and K. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

25 S. Etchemendy and C. Garay, *op. cit.*

of them. Despite the attempts at depolarisation and technocratic "good governance", the backlash against the moderate left was almost as fierce as the one against the populist left. Chile was a poster child for economic growth and stability under the Concertación governments, and they were hailed as models for leftist social-liberal governance. However, their agenda was progressively blocked by polarisation after Michelle Bachelet's election in 2006. Bachelet's two administrations (2006-2010 and 2014-2018) were hampered by accusations of populism and *Chavismo*, much to the surprise of leftist populists in other countries in the region. The Concertación was not able to develop an effective counter-strategy against the attacks on Bachelet. Within a few years, the former two parties that had built the all-powerful Concertación coalition were electorally diminished. In the 2021 presidential elections, the independent leftist Gabriel Boric was elected.

The most relevant case is that of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT). A mass leftist party built on the classic model, whose original leader and management cadre were hardened by years of union organisation in the metallurgical factories of São Paulo and by their activism against the dictatorship. The PT built its way to the presidency from the bottom up, winning municipal and local elections before winning at the national level; Leader Lula Da Silva ran for president three times before finally winning in 2004. His eight years in government were praised for their moderation and institutionality: the PT did not draft a new constitution, did not seek to change property rights, and implemented pro-market policies. It was a successful mandate: economic growth was impressive, fifty million Brazilians were lifted out of poverty, and Brazil was a stabilising influence for the entire South American region. When Lula's constitutional term ended, he did not attempt to force his way into a new term but went out to support his former minister of economy, Dilma Rousseff.

Rousseff sought to court Brazil's powerful industrial elite with even more business-friendly policies. And yet, the entire Brazilian business élite rallied against her government until she was accused on quite scant grounds in 2016 and forced to leave the government. Soon after, Lula Da Silva, acclaimed in international forums as a success story, was accused of corruption and served two years in prison. The charges were ultimately dismissed by Brazil's Supreme Court after it was found that the trial judge had fabricated evidence.

The Uruguayan Frente Amplio governed Uruguay for a remarkable eighteen-year period (2005-2020). The achievements of the FA governments were many: maintaining economic stability even though Uruguay is the neighbour of the economically unstable and much bigger Argentina, upholding social equality. Under the FA, Uruguay was routinely characterised as the most institutionalised democracy in Latin America. However, polarisation was also present. Moreover, the opposing sectors were like those that mobilised against Argentina's leftist populism or against the Brazilian PT. The main opposition to President Tabaré Vázquez's government in 2018 came from agricultural producers: they staged massive protests reminiscent of the producers" blockades against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner 's government in 2008. Also, the right coalesced around some pro-military actors that pushed for the denial of the crimes committed during Uruguay's military dictatorship (also similar to Argentina).

To sum up this section: It is unclear that moderation actually lowered polarisation and brought about stability. It seems like polarisation engulfed all of the leftist governments, populists, and moderates alike, including the rushed impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the imprisonment of Lula Da Silva in Brazil. Moderation and institutionalisation do not correlate with dramatically greater presidential resilience. The agenda of the moderate President Bachelet was effectively blocked, President Rousseff was accused and impeached, and the PT faced strong opposition from 2014 onwards. It is as if any attempt at redressing social inequality and advancing political and economic inclusion is enough, in and of itself, to generate an élite-driven backlash. Leftism, not populism per se, is seen as unforgivable.

Conclusion: Weighing the Legacies of Left Populism

As was said at the beginning, it can be hard to parse legacies or consequences. Causal relations are hard to isolate. However, some conclusions can be drawn. Here are some of them.

a. Populism was an effective strategy for winning elections and building political resilience:

The first one is that left populism was an effective political strategy to achieve both electoral success and resilience in government. Populist governments lasted twelve years in power on average. They were able to amass notable electoral majorities, and pass substantial legislation including in some cases constitutional reforms. In power, they were able to sustain high popular support through active distributive policies directed toward the lower classes, and also through the mobilisation of political antagonism against a common adversary. The relation between populist governments and democracy remains ambiguous, but ultimately it is not possible to argue that populism has been in and of itself an authoritarian force. While it is true that Venezuelan Chavismo went from a left populist experience to a full autocratic regime, the other cases belonging to the tide have stayed democratic. All of these left populist governments were durable and resilient; they lasted in power and most of them remained important political forces after leaving office; in some cases, they won elections after the first tide ended (like in Bolivia and Argentina) or came close to doing so (like in Ecuador in 2025).

b. Leftism, not only populism, caused an elite-driven backlash:

There is no denying that the backlash against left populism was fierce. However, the backlash against non-populist leftist governments was equally fierce and, moreover, no amount of pro-establishment discourses was able to avoid it. Suffice it to say that Lula Da Silva, Brazil's most consequential president in a century and a steadfast institutionalist, was thrown into jail. It seems that leftism, not populism,

is enough to conjure the ire of economic and cultural elites who are deeply committed to maintaining the *status quo*.

c. Right populism has been adopted by those very same elites:

After the end of the tide, many held the hope that populism was a thing of the past. The expectation of a rightward shift that would usher in an era of technocratic and liberal governance seemed definitively confirmed in 2016 with the successful impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, culminating in her removal from office and the assumption of power by her vice president, Michel Temer. This expectation was further solidified in 2018 when Sebastián Piñera defeated the leftist Alejandro Guillier in the polls, and with the ascent of Iván Duque to the presidency of Colombia in the same year. The new era foreshadowed a new hegemony of liberal, technocratic forces, led by moderate centre-right figures seemingly above populism, such as Michel Temer, Mauricio Macri, Sebastián Piñera, and Iván Duque. However, once again, the hope of leaving populism behind quickly vanished. The governments of the technocratic right were opaque, without the desired results. Michel Temer left power in 2018 with a very low public image. Mauricio Macri, who transformed the phrase "¡No vuelven mas!" (They won"t come back!) into an antipopulist slogan, was defeated in 2019. Sebastián Piñera never recovered from the impact of the Chilean social unrest. All of them failed: Temer left office with abysmal approval ratings, Piñera was defeated in the aftermath of Chile's "estallido", and Macri could not secure his own reelection. He was beaten by the very same Peronists that he swore to eradicate from politics.

It is no mystery, then, that the economic and political elites embraced those very same populist strategies that they had tried to eradicate by any means necessary. They embraced figures like Javier Milei in Argentina and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and of right-wing populists in Europe certainly helped.) These leaders are reminiscent of the neoliberal past, but they are something different. The technocratic discourse of good governance and the appeal to an identification based on expertise, which had been an important component of "centre" party experiences like those of Macri and Piñera, disappeared. To give an example: if Mauricio Macri had come to power in Argentina with the slogan "the best team of the last fifty years" and promising "you won"t lose anything you already had", Javier Milei came to power wielding a chainsaw and vowing to "destroy the state from within".

The promise of these populisms is not the improvement of the citizens" private lives, or even the strengthening of markets, but the participation in an epic movement against morally-characterised adversaries: the state, crime, immigration, feminism, environmentalism, *Agenda 2030*, globalism. This discourse allows these new populisms to compete for support in the popular classes, among the poorest sectors, and among young men mobilised by social media[26]; however, at the same time, their ability to attract at least a part of the old economic and political elites, who support the discourse of economic liberalisation, is key. These new populisms come to power when they manage to form coalitions that garner popular support and support among the affluent classes.

d. While no longer dominant, left populism is still alive:

However, populism is very much alive in South America and it remains an effective political strategy. The case of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Claudia Sheinbaum in México's Morena seems to point to the fact that left populism is still viable under the present social, economic and political conditions. In fact, it can be the most viable choice, more so than the incremental creation of political power through party building. Also, the Brazilian PT and Lula Da Silva seem to have moved towards a more populist strategy in the most recent years: a greater reliance on Lula's figure and a very broad coalition built around moral and political denunciation of "Bolsonarismo" as antidemocratic. On the other hand, the non-populist left coalitions (like the one that carried Gabriel Boric to power in Chile) have shown to be rather brittle and fragile (with the exception of the Uruguay Frente Amplio). There is no obvious advantage in non-populism in the present context for the left.

Thus, political competition in South America seems to be structured around the struggle between left-wing and right-wing populisms for the foreseeable future. Under the current conditions of polarisation, social fragmentation and sense of disenchantment, populism remains effective for constructing political identities.

This analysis presupposes that populism is a political logic or form that can be combined with different ideological contents. This is in line with Ernesto Laclau's well-known assertion that, while populist antagonism serves an "ontological" function, its particular "ontic contents" are ultimately contingent and "this function can be performed by signifiers of an entirely opposite political sign"[27]. While there are other scholars consider than right populism should be characterised simply as fascism[28], I believe that the concept of populism as a political form is useful to understand the current and possibly future politics of the region. The political dispute today is structured around the competition between populist right-wing movements and parties and left populist ones. The research agenda must move towards interrogating why non-populist parties and movements have such difficulties in achieving power and building political durability. The current moment, then, underscores the degree in which the populist tide did not really end but is more alive than never.

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26 J. Balsa, *¿Por qué ganó Milei? Disputas por la hegemonía y la ideología en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2024.

27 E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 87.

28 For this debate see M.E. Casullo, "Left and Right," in Y. Stavrakakis and G. Katzambekis (eds.), *Research Handbook on Populism*, London, Elgar, 2023, pp. 348–359.

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