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The emergence of ethno-populism in Latin America

Raúl L. Madrid

Populist leaders in Latin America traditionally avoided ethnic appeals. The classical populist leaders in the region sought to win the support of indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, but they appealed to them as peasants or workers rather than as members of ethnic minorities. Beginning in the 1990s, however, many populist leaders, especially in the Andean region, introduced ethnic elements into their campaigns. They forged close ties with ethnic movements; they recruited indigenous and Afro-Latino leaders to their parties; and they embraced ethnic symbols and demands. Moreover, ethno-populist leaders in Latin America have typically reached out to indigenous people and Afro-Latinos without excluding whites and mestizos who have traditionally dominated politics in the region.

What has led to the emergence of ethno-populism in Latin America? Why has it been more inclusive than the ethno-populism found in Europe and elsewhere? And what are the implications of ethno-populism for democracy in the region?

I define ethno-populism as a discourse and political strategy that combines ethnic and populist appeals. Populist appeals, as de la Torre emphasizes in Chapter 1, are focused on the subaltern sectors: they seek to address the demands of the masses while disparaging the elites. Populist appeals also tend to be personalistic: they depict the leaders as the embodiment of the masses and center campaigns around them. And populists are anti-establishment: they denounce the existing institutional order and vow to overturn it. Ethno-populists wed ethnic appeals to these populist strategies, invoking the symbols, demands, and interests of specific ethnic groups. Following Chandra and Wilkinson (2008, 517), I define ethnicity as a category “in which descent-based attributes are necessary for membership.” Ethnicity is typically organized around characteristics that are difficult to change, such as native language or racial phenotypes, but people nevertheless often belong to multiple ethnic groups and they may switch their ethnic identification over time (Birnir 2007; Chandra 2006). In Latin America, the central ethnic groups include indigenous people, Afro-Latinos, whites, and mestizos, although as I discuss below the boundaries between members of these different groups are often vague and porous.

This chapter argues that populist leaders have embraced ethno-racial appeals in large part because of growing ethno-racial consciousness in the region. Democratization, the debt crisis, and the wave of neoliberal reforms that followed the crisis spurred the rise of indigenous and Afro-Latino movements that have helped revitalize indigenous and Afro-Latino identities.
Populist leaders adopted ethnic appeals in order to woo increasingly ethnically conscious indigenous and Afro-Latino voters and gain the support of their fledgling movements. In many countries, indigenous people and Afro-Latinos constitute a significant portion of the electorate and they represent a natural constituency for populists, given that many indigenous people and Afro-Latinos are poor and politically disenchanted.

Ethno-populism in Latin America has been ethnically inclusive. Populist leaders in the region have reached out to whites and mestizos at the same time that they have sought support from indigenous people and Afro-Latinos. By contrast, in Europe and some other regions, ethno-populists have been exclusionary, seeking to drum up support from people of European descent by demonizing immigrants and ethnic minorities. Latin American populists have opted to be inclusive in part because widespread mestizaje, or ethnic mixing, has blurred ethnic boundaries and reduced ethnic polarization, making it possible for ethno-populists to win support across ethnic lines. By contrast, in some other regions, high levels of ethnic polarization and a paucity of ethnic mixing have made it difficult to assemble inter-ethnic coalitions. Moreover, the fact that the main ethno-racial minorities in many regions, but not in Latin America, are recent immigrants has encouraged populists in those regions to woo voters with exclusionary nationalist and nativist appeals.

Ethno-populism has had mixed implications for democracy in the region. On the one hand, the ethnically inclusive nature of ethno-populism in Latin America has strengthened democracy. Ethno-populist leaders in Latin America have sought to incorporate politically marginalized ethnic groups, recognize ethnic rights, and address ethnic inequalities. They have helped boost political participation and satisfaction with democracy among indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, without worsening inter-ethnic relations. On the other hand, the populist strategies that these leaders have employed have undermined democracy in the region. The efforts of these leaders to concentrate power and attack the political establishment have weakened horizontal accountability, debilitated the opposition and independent voices, and worsened political polarization.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section discusses the history of populism in the region and the emergence of ethno-populist leaders in recent years. The second section seeks to explain why the use of ethno-populist appeals has grown and why some leaders have used them more than others. The third section explains why ethno-populist leaders in Latin America have been ethnically inclusive, while in Europe and other regions they have often been exclusionary. The fourth section discusses the implications of ethno-populism for democracy in the region. The conclusion summarizes these arguments and discusses the future of ethno-populism in the region.

A brief history of ethno-populism in Latin America

Populist leaders have been commonplace in Latin America at least since the 1930s, but early populists, from Juan Perón in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil to Victor Haya de la Torre in Peru and Victor Paz Estenssoro in Bolivia, largely eschewed ethnic appeals (Conniff 1982; de la Torre 2000; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Weyland 1999). The early populists almost never recruited indigenous or Afro-Latino people as candidates for important elected posts or for leadership positions in their parties. They rarely advocated indigenous or Afro-Latino causes, such as the teaching of indigenous languages, the combatting of ethnic or racial discrimination, or the extension of indigenous land and water rights. Nor did they promote ethnic identities and organizations. Instead, populist leaders, like most other politicians in Latin America prior to the 1990s, largely downplayed ethnic or racial differences in their societies.
Populist leaders sought, and sometimes won, the support of indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, but they appealed to them largely in terms of their socioeconomic class, rather than their ethnicity. Populist leaders wooed black and indigenous voters with populist platforms and rhetoric as well as clientelist handouts. They denounced the political and economic establishment; they presented themselves as the savior of the people and the embodiment of change; and they called for the nationalization of foreign companies, the redistribution of income, and the reform of their countries’ constitutions. In short, populist leaders used the same strategies to appeal to ethnic minorities that they used to attract other working and middle-class groups.

During the 1990s, however, this began to change. Many populist leaders forged close ties to indigenous and Afro-Latino movements. They recruited a variety of indigenous and Afro-Latino leaders as candidates and nominated them for important leadership positions within their parties. They embraced many traditional demands of indigenous and Afro-Latino communities, including multicultural education, indigenous land and water rights, anti-discrimination measures, and the recognition of indigenous languages. They also undertook various symbolic measures, from using ethnic clothing, languages, and music in their campaigns to calling for their countries to be recognized as multilingual and multicultural.

Some populist leaders embraced ethno-racial appeals more than others. Evo Morales in Bolivia, for example, has made ethnic as well as populist appeals a centerpiece of his political campaigns as well as his governing policies. Morales, who is of Aymara descent, was a leader of the largely Quechua-speaking coca growers’ unions, which gained control of the indigenous movement in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, Morales and other indigenous leaders decided to form a political party, which eventually became the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS). This party initially focused mostly on opposition to coca eradication and other concerns relevant to its indigenous base, but in the early 2000s it moved in a broader, more populist direction. Morales came to dominate the MAS, which built its campaigns around his leadership. He denounced the political and economic establishment as corrupt and self-serving and vowed to work on behalf of the interests of the masses. He called for constitutional reform, redistribution of wealth and political power, and an end to neoliberalism and foreign intervention in Bolivia. Morales wedded these populist appeals to ethnic demands, however. He styled the MAS as the legitimate representative of Bolivia’s indigenous population and recruited numerous indigenous leaders as candidates. Indeed, typically at least half of the MAS’s legislative delegation was indigenous (Madrid 2012, 61). Morales called for tightening laws against discrimination, expanding multicultural education, and recognizing indigenous languages as well as indigenous forms of justice and indigenous land and water rights. Once elected president, he moved rapidly to convert many of these demands into policies.

Pachakutik, an indigenous-based party in Ecuador, similarly embraced ethno-populism during this period. Indigenous organizations founded Pachakutik in the mid-1990s and have played a central leadership role in the party. From the outset, the party employed widespread ethnic appeals. Pachakutik, like the MAS, nominated many indigenous leaders as candidates for important political positions and typically more than two-thirds of its legislative delegation was indigenous (Madrid 2011, 86). Pachakutik also endorsed many of the traditional demands of the indigenous movement in Ecuador, including multicultural education, affirmative action, indigenous autonomy and the recognition of indigenous collective rights. It complemented these ethnic demands with populist appeals, however. In 1996 and 1998, Pachakutik nominated a well-known television personality, Freddy Ehlers, as its presidential candidate and in 2002 it supported the leader of a military rebellion, Lucio Gutiérrez, as its presidential candidates. Both of these candidates ran traditional populist campaigns with some ethnic elements. Ehlers and Gutiérrez denounced the traditional parties and political elites and
pronounced themselves the saviors of their countries. They attacked the neoliberal policies that previous governments had implemented and Gutiérrez called for the U.S. to give up its military base in Manta, Ecuador. Gutiérrez was elected president in 2002, but once in office he shifted the course, allying with the U.S. and adopting market-oriented policies. As a result, Pachakutik broke with the Gutiérrez administration, which helped lead to the party’s decline and paved the way for the rise of Rafael Correa. Correa adopted many of Pachakutik’s populist appeals. He made occasional ethnic appeals – he declared, for example, in 2006 that “I am an indigenista in the good sense of the term” (Zeas 2006, 225) – but he had rocky relations with the indigenous movement.

Populist leaders in Peru have also used ethno-populism, although ethnic appeals have been less central to their campaigns than populist strategies. Alejandro Toledo, for example, described himself as a cholo (an often pejorative term for an urban person of indigenous descent) and invoked numerous indigenous symbols, even going so far as to include an indigenous ceremony in Machu Picchu as part of his inauguration. Ollanta Humala similarly emphasized his indigenous name and Andean origins in his presidential campaigns and used various indigenous symbols, including indigenous clothing and the rainbow-colored indigenous flag. Toledo and Humala forged ties to some indigenous organizations and recruited some indigenous leaders as candidates and adopted some ethnic demands, but their ethnic demands and links to indigenous leaders and organizations were much weaker than those of Morales and Pachakutik. Both Toledo and Humala also used populist appeals extensively, denouncing the political establishment and elites and presenting themselves as the incarnation of the people and the defender of the poor. Toledo was more of a neo-populist than a classical populist, however. He supported market-oriented policies and maintained close relations with the United States, for example (Barr 2003). Humala, by contrast, started out as a classical populist, denouncing neoliberal policies and foreign intervention in Peru, but over time he, too, moderated his rhetoric and platform.

Hugo Chávez in Venezuela similarly combined ethnic and populist appeals. Chávez was the first president of Venezuela to recognize his African ancestry, and his government established ties to many Afro-Venezuelan, as well as indigenous, organizations and leaders (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States 2011). Chávez also established laws to combat racism, recognized indigenous rights, promoted multicultural education, and created a Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, including a Vice-Minister for Afro Affairs (Angosto-Ferrández Forthcoming). Like Toledo and Humala, Chávez emphasized populist appeals more than ethnic appeals, however. Chávez ran for the presidency as a political outsider, having previously tried to overthrow the government in a military coup. He railed against the traditional parties and the neoliberal economic policies that they had implemented and once in power he sought to dismantle these policies and institutions. He reformed the constitution multiple times, nationalized foreign companies, and sought to redistribute wealth to poor. He also relentlessly attacked the traditional parties, the economic elites, and the media.

The ethno-populist appeals have worked for the most part. Chávez, Correa, Morales, Gutiérrez, Humala, and Toledo all captured the presidency, and Chávez, Correa, and Morales were reelected multiple times. They drew a large portion of their support disproportionately from traditional populist constituencies, such as poor and politically disenchanted mestizos, who were attracted by their populist appeals (Madrid 2012). They also won large shares of the indigenous vote and, in some cases, the Afro-Latino vote as well (Madrid 2012; Jackson 2012; Van Cott 2005). Thus, their ethno-populist strategies helped them fuse together a winning populist and ethnic coalition of voters.
The transformation of populism in Latin America

The Latin American literature on populism would not expect populist leaders to make ethnic appeals. As noted above, classical populist movements in Latin America did not employ ethnic appeals, but rather aimed to attract the undifferentiated masses (Weyland 1999, 383; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 165). Traditional Latin American populists divided the world between the masses and the elites, not between different ethnic groups, and they emphasized anti-establishment, personalistic, and redistributive appeals.

The recent move by populist leaders to incorporate ethnic appeals is in large part a product of the growing ethnic consciousness and mobilization that swept the region beginning in the 1980s. For much of the 20th century, ethnic identities in the region were suppressed. Latin American governments carried out nation-building projects that aimed to assimilate indigenous people and Afro-Latinos and build a single national identity. Governments eliminated questions about race or ethnicity from their censuses and ethnic or racial terms largely ceased to be used in governmental operations (Loveman 2014). Indigenous people were recast as peasants and the teaching of indigenous languages was discouraged (Albó 1991; Yashar 2005). Many governments also actively promoted mestizaje or ethno-racial mixing and some of them encouraged immigration from Europe to whiten their populations. Social discrimination against indigenous people and Afro-Latinos led many of them to embrace mestizo identities, particularly those living in urban areas.

In the 1980s, however, ethnic identities and movements began to reemerge in Latin America. The rise in ethnic consciousness stemmed partly from the return to democracy in the region, which provided greater opportunities for self-expression and political organizing. Many indigenous and Afro-Latino leaders and communities took advantage of the increased political space to organize ethnic movements, and they were supported in many instances by international organizations that moved into the region on a large scale during this period (Yashar 2005; Brysk 2000). The market-oriented reforms that Latin American countries implemented in the wake of the debt crisis also provoked ethnic mobilization because these reforms negatively affected many indigenous and Afro-Latino communities. Trade liberalization policies, for example, led to a flood of agricultural imports that overwhelmed many indigenous farmers, prompting widespread protests. Both indigenous people and Afro-Latinos were also hurt by the cuts in social spending that followed the debt crisis, and they mobilized in some countries to resist these policies.

Indigenous movements have exhibited the greatest level of mobilization since the late 1980s. In Bolivia, important indigenous organizations emerged throughout the country. As noted, powerful unions of Quechua-speaking coca growers grew increasingly mobilized in the 1980s and eventually took over the main Bolivian peasant organization. The Katarista movement, an Aymara-based movement that dated from the 1970s, and a new Amazonian indigenous confederation, CIDOB, which was founded in 1982, also carried out protests against neoliberal policies. In Ecuador, indigenous organizations from both the highlands and the Amazon came together to found a national confederation, CONAIE, in 1986. In the years that followed, CONAIE demonstrated an impressive capacity to mobilize people, helping to overthrow two presidents and blocking some neoliberal policies. CONAIE played the central role in organizing Ecuador’s indigenous population, but smaller federations, such as FEINE and FENOCIN, also engaged in activism. During this period, increasingly assertive indigenous movements emerged in Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico as well, although they were not as powerful as the Bolivian and Ecuadorean movements (Albó 1991, 2002; Dary 1998; Van Cott 1994; Yashar 2005).
Afro-Latino organizations also sprang up in many countries in the region beginning in the 1980s, although these movements have not yet achieved the strength of the more powerful indigenous movements (Hooker 2008; Paschel and Sawyer 2008). Brazil has one of the oldest Afro-Latino movements in the region and it has grown steadily stronger in recent years. Perhaps the most important Afro-Brazilian organization is the Unified Black Movement, which was founded in 1978, and has pushed for anti-discrimination measures, affirmative action policies and the incorporation of black leaders by political parties (Hanchard 1994, 1999). In Colombia, various organizations, such as Procesos de Comunidades Negras, Cimarrón, and the Afro-Colombian Working Group, have also arisen to defend the rights of Afro-Colombians, although the movement remains relatively fragmented. Similarly, the Afro-Venezuelan Network emerged in Venezuela and the Central American Black Organization (ONECA) was founded in Central America to lobby for the rights of Afro-descendants and to combat racial inequalities in those countries.

The ethnic movements have played an important role in revalorizing ethnic identities in the region. Indigenous and Afro-Latino movements encouraged people not only to become ethnically conscious, but also to organize, proselytize, and make ethnic demands. Guerrero Cazar and Ospina Peralta (2003, 164) described how a speech by the Ecuadorean indigenous leader, Luis Macas, led one young man to reclaim his indigenous identity and get involved with the indigenous movement:

In his speech, Macas had mentioned that it wasn’t possible to cease to be an Indian. You could cut off your braid and change your dress, but you would continue to be indigenous inside. And furthermore, to try to abandon what you were and what your parents had been was a mistake. You had to be proud of your origins, of your culture, of your way of living.

Although time series data on ethnicity in the region is scarce, the available data suggests that an increasing number of people are willing to identify as indigenous or Afro-Latino. Latin American Public Opinion Project surveys from Bolivia, for example, found that the percentage of people who classified themselves as indigenous increased by 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2008 (Moreno Morales et al. 2008, xxxiii). In Brazil, the percentage of the population that identifies as black (preto) or brown (pardo) on the census has also increased steadily in recent years, and now exceeds 50 percent of the population. The size of the self-identified indigenous population has also expanded significantly in Brazil and a recent study found that most of the increase has stemmed from people reclassifying themselves as indigenous (Perz et al. 2008).

Populist leaders have sought to capitalize on the increase in ethnic consciousness in the region by establishing ties with indigenous and Afro-Latino leaders and movements, and by wooing indigenous and Afro-Latino voters with ethnic appeals. Indigenous people and Afro-Latinos represent an obvious constituency for populists because they are mostly poor and socially marginalized. They are often politically disenchanted as well: indigenous people, for example, had weak ties to the traditional parties in many countries, which led to high levels of electoral volatility and party system fragmentation in indigenous areas (Madrid 2005a, 2005c). As a result, they have often proven receptive to the anti-establishment, clientelistic, and redistributive appeals of populist leaders. Moreover, the addition of ethnic appeals to the populist repertoire further enhanced the attractiveness of populists to indigenous and Afro-Latino voters.

The populist leaders that have emerged directly from ethnic movements, such as Evo Morales in Bolivia, have employed the most widespread ethnic appeals. By contrast, populist leaders that have emerged from non-ethnic parties or institutions, such as Ollanta Humala and Alejandro Toledo in Peru or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, have used ethnic appeals only
intermittently, preferring to focus mostly on traditional populist appeals. In both cases, however, the ethno-populist appeals have proven to be relatively successful, generating high levels of support for the populist leaders among indigenous people and/or Afro-Latinos.

**Inclusive versus exclusionary ethno-populism**

Ethno-populism in Latin America has been ethnically inclusive. Ethno-populists in the region have sought support not only from indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, but also from whites and mestizos. They have avoided exclusionary language, recruited ethnically diverse candidates, forged ties with organizations that represent a variety of ethnic groups, and developed broad and ethnically inclusive platforms.

By contrast, ethno-populists in other regions of the world have been highly exclusionary. Ethno-populists in Europe, such as Jean Marie Le Pen in France and Jorg Haider in Austria, have demonized immigrants and ethnic minorities, and roused nativist sentiments among the population of European-origin (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). They have sought not only to block more immigrants from entering their countries, but also to prevent recent immigrants from using state services and even to expel them from their countries. Exclusionary populists in Europe have often used highly charged language, portraying immigrants and ethnic minorities as terrorists, criminals, and parasites, among other things. With the rise of Donald Trump, exclusionary ethno-populism appears to have spread to the United States as well.

Ethno-populism has taken a more inclusive form in Latin America than in Europe or the United States for a couple of reasons. To begin with, immigration is much lower in Latin America than in Europe or the United States in part because Latin American countries are less developed and thus are viewed as less desirable places to immigrate. The principal ethnic minorities in Latin America are not recent immigrants, but rather groups with deep roots in the region. Indeed, indigenous people arrived in the Americas long before Europeans did, and Africans were brought to the Americas shortly after the European Conquest. By contrast, Europe and the United States have received numerous immigrants in recent decades. These immigrants have brought foreign customs and cultures to their new countries, they have competed with native citizens for jobs, and they have sometimes been associated with poverty, criminality or terrorism, all of which have provoked a nativist backlash. Populists in Europe have fed on this anti-immigrant sentiment, using exclusionary anti-immigrant appeals to woo political support among the native population, particularly from poorer and less educated sectors.

Ethno-populism has also been more inclusive in Latin America because Latin America has much lower levels of ethnic polarization. High levels of *mestizaje* have blurred ethnic boundaries in Latin America and reduced ethnic polarization. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Latin Americans do not identify with specific racial or ethnic categories at all, but rather typically place themselves on a racial or ethnic continuum, ranging from indigenous or black on one side to white on the other side, with mestizos and mulattos in the middle (Morner 1967; Wade 1997). Various studies have found that many people in the region, particularly those with a mixed ethno-racial background, have fluid or ambiguous ethnic identities or identify with multiple ethnic groups. Some people who self-identify as mestizo, for example, maintain indigenous customs and are willing to identify with certain indigenous categories (de la Cadena 2000; Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2004). Latin American Public Opinion Project surveys in Bolivia found that many people who self-identified as mestizo spoke indigenous languages and identified to a degree with indigenous culture (Madrid 2008). Similarly, in Ecuador a 2006 survey found that less than
3 percent of the population self-identified as indigenous, but 10 percent strongly identified with Quichua culture, and another 29 percent moderately identified with Quichua culture (Madrid 2012, 79–80).

The low level of ethnic polarization in Latin America has reduced the attractiveness of exclusionary ethnic appeals for populist politicians as well as for voters. Indeed, politicians and political parties that have used exclusionary ethnic appeals, such as Felipe Quispe and the Movimiento Indígena Pachakutik (MIP) in Bolivia, have fared poorly. In Europe, by contrast, ethnic polarization has been high in recent decades. There has been less mixing between recent immigrants and the native European populations who are commonly viewed as occupying distinct racial or ethnic categories, rather than different places on a continuum. The high levels of ethnic polarization in Europe have made exclusionary appeals attractive to many voters and ethno-populist politicians have used them quite effectively to win votes.

**Ethno-populism and democracy in Latin America**

To date, ethno-populism has had a mixed impact on democracy in Latin America (Madrid 2012). Whereas the ethnically oriented policies of ethno-populist leaders have largely had a positive impact on democracy in the region, the traditional populist strategies employed by these leaders have largely had a negative impact. Ethno-populist leaders have strengthened Latin American democracies by promoting greater ethnic inclusion and by addressing ethnic demands, without worsening ethnic polarization. They have also stimulated increased political participation and support for democracy among indigenous people and Afro-Latinos. At the same time, however, some ethno-populist leaders have undermined democracy by concentrating power, weakening horizontal accountability, and attacking the media and the political opposition. These latter strategies were widely used by Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Gutiérrez and Correa in Ecuador, but much less so by Toledo and Humala in Peru. As a result, democracy has been stronger in Peru in recent years than in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Minority ethnic groups traditionally had little political influence in Latin America. Indigenous and Afro-Latino movements, which were inchoate and fragmented prior to the 1980s, lacked political clout, as did their leaders. Indigenous people and Afro-Latinos occasionally served as mayors or council members in areas where they constituted a majority of the population, but few of them served in the legislature or occupied important positions in government ministries. Voter turnout and other forms of political participation also tended to be lower in areas where large numbers of indigenous people and Afro-Latinos lived, and indigenous people and Afro-Latinos often expressed low levels of support for and satisfaction with democracy (Madrid 2005b, 2012; Wray 1996; Ticona Alejo et al. 1995).

The rise of ethno-populism in Latin America has helped transform this situation. The number of indigenous people serving in the legislature and government ministries has skyrocketed in some countries. In Ecuador, Pachakutik alone elected six indigenous legislators in 1998, seven in 2002 and five in 2006. The MAS did even better. According to Loayza Bueno (2012, 8), indigenous people represented only 4 percent of the legislature in 1993–1997, but by 2009–2013, they constituted 25 percent, all of them belonging to the MAS. Lucio Gutiérrez and Evo Morales also appointed indigenous people to key governmental positions, including the Minister of Foreign Relations and the Minister of Agriculture in both countries. In addition, the Morales administration reformed the constitution to mandate ethnic representation in the national legislature and the national and departmental electoral tribunals. Other ethno-populist leaders, such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Ollanta Humala, and Alejandro Toledo, also brought in indigenous people and Afro-Latinos into their governments,
although not as many as Morales or Gutiérrez. The Chávez administration’s 1999 constitution, for example, set aside three seats for indigenous people in the legislature.

Indigenous movements have also gained increased political influence under ethno-populist leaders. The coca growers’ unions in Bolivia have been particularly influential since Morales came to power and Morales continues to be the nominal head of the main federation of unions of coca growers. Other indigenous organizations also shape policymaking in Bolivia through their participation in state institutions or the MAS’s assemblies, but some indigenous organizations, such as CIDOB and CONAMAQ, have broken with the Morales administration and are no longer influential. The main indigenous federation in Ecuador, CONAIE, similarly wielded significant influence at the outset of the Gutiérrez administration, but it lost that influence when it broke with his government. CONAIE remained marginalized during the Correa administration, but some smaller indigenous and Afro-Latino federations, such as the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI), maintained close ties to Correa (Becker 2013, 50–51). Indigenous and Afro-Latino federations have also wielded some influence under ethno-populist leaders in Peru and Venezuela, but these organizations are much weaker in the latter countries than in Bolivia and Ecuador. In Venezuela, for example, the Chávez administration created a Ministry of Indigenous Peoples (MINPI) in 2007 that provided a channel for the Venezuelan indigenous movement to shape government policy (Angosto-Ferrández Forthcoming).

Ethno-populist leaders, under pressure from indigenous and Afro-Latino movements, have adopted policies that promote ethnic rights and seek to reduce ethnic inequalities and discrimination. In Bolivia, the Morales administration enacted a new constitution that recognized indigenous languages and symbols, declared the country to be plurinational, and granted the indigenous population various collective rights, including autonomy and land rights. Morales also tightened laws against ethnic and racial discrimination and enacted agrarian reform and social programs that disproportionately benefited indigenous people. The Chávez administration in Venezuela, the Correa administration in Ecuador, and the Humala administration in Peru also sought to address ethnic inequalities through increased spending on social programs. Chávez and Correa also recognized some indigenous rights when they enacted their new constitutions, as did the Humala administration when it passed a law requiring prior consultation before undertaking development activities in indigenous areas. Nevertheless, these rights have not always been enforced rigorously and some indigenous organizations in these countries have criticized these governments for not doing enough to help them.

Indeed, growing tensions have emerged between populist leaders and indigenous movements, especially with regard to the populist presidents’ extractivist policies and unwillingness to share power. In Ecuador, for example, the indigenous movement protested the Correa administration’s 2009 mining law and its decision to strip the indigenous movement of its control of the country’s bilingual education program (Martínez Novo 2014, 114–121). Correa, meanwhile, harshly criticized some indigenous leaders, leading to a sharp deterioration in relations with the indigenous movement. The Correa administration maintained better relations with the Afro-Ecuadorian movement, but some scholars have argued that Correa coopted and weakened Afro-Ecuadorian organizations (de la Torre and Antón Sánchez 2012). Relations between some indigenous organizations and the Morales administration in Bolivia have also deteriorated in recent years, especially in the wake of the government’s decision to build a road through the TIPNIS ecological reserve. Similarly, in Peru, the administrations of both Alan García and Ollanta Humala repeatedly clashed with indigenous protestors over their extractivist policies.

Nevertheless, the available data suggest that political participation and support for democracy by indigenous people and Afro-Latinos have increased under ethno-populist rule. Ethno-populist leaders have worked to expand voter turnout in indigenous and Afro-Latino areas by...
pushing for the creation of more voting centers in these areas, the distribution of free voter identification cards, and the translation of electoral materials into indigenous languages (Madrid 2012, 169–170). These measures, along with voter enthusiasm for ethno-populist candidates, helped boost voter turnout in majority indigenous municipalities to the point that it exceeded turnout in minority indigenous areas in Bolivia and Ecuador (Madrid 2012, 170–171). Support for and satisfaction with democracy also increased after the election of ethno-populist leaders in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Moreover, in Bolivia, regime support not only increased after the election of Morales, it rose significantly more among indigenous people than among whites and mestizos (Madrid and Rhodes-Purdy 2016).

Increased political participation and support for democracy under ethno-populist rule has strengthened democracy in the Andean countries. So, too, has the recognition of ethnic rights and the increased inclusion of indigenous people and Afro-Latinos in these countries. Under ethno-populist rule, democracies in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela became more representative of and responsive to ethnic minorities than they used to be. Moreover, such progress was achieved without worsening ethnic polarization because ethno-populist leaders in the region reached out to all ethnic groups and were careful to avoid exclusionary language that might incite inter-ethnic conflict or hostility.

Nevertheless, ethno-populist leaders have also employed traditional populist strategies that have undermined democracy in the region. They have concentrated power, undermined horizontal accountability, and attacked the media and the political opposition. In some cases, these measures have more than offset the positive contributions that their ethnically inclusive policies have made to democracy in region.

Populist leaders have traditionally sought to concentrate power in themselves and the ethno-populist leaders have been no exception. When they took power, Morales, Correa, and Chávez all reformed their countries’ constitutions in ways that strengthened their grip on power and weakened horizontal accountability. Morales’s constitutional reforms, for example, allowed him to run for re-election, expanded the legislature to tighten the MAS’s control of it, and created direct elections for the judiciary in order to stack it with his supporters. Morales also used various methods to gain control of the electoral institute, which supervises elections, and the departmental governments. Similarly, shortly after taking office in Venezuela, Chávez oversaw a constitutional reform that expanded his powers, allowed the immediate reelection of the president, dissolved the legislature, overhauled the country’s electoral laws, and allowed the recall of officeholders. He subsequently expanded and stacked the Supreme Court, and asserted his control of the National Electoral Council, the Comptroller’s Office, and the Central Bank (Corrales 2010). Correa also initiated a constitutional reform process that shut down the legislature, stripped authority from mayors, enabled presidential reelection and expanded his powers, giving the president the right to dissolve the legislature and dominate constitutional oversight bodies (Madrid et al. 2010, 168; Montúfar 2008).

The ethno-populists have also undermined democracy by attacking the media and the political opposition. Chávez, Morales, and Correa not only denounced opposition leaders, they pursued criminal charges against them. The Morales administration has filed criminal charges against most of the living past presidents of Bolivia, including Carlos Mesa, Jorge Quiroga, Eduardo Rodríguez, and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, as well as a variety of other leading political figures. The Chávez administration also attacked opposition figures, pushing some of them from their offices, and jailing others or driving them into exile. Rafael Correa, meanwhile, passed a law allowing the government to shut down non-governmental organizations that changed their objectives or disturbed the public peace, and he subsequently used this law to shut down an environmental organization, Pachamama, that had carried out protests against
his policies. All three ethno-populist leaders have employed mass mobilizations to intimidate their critics and political opponents. For example, the Morales administration used popular protests to put pressure on opposition prefects to resign and to intimidate legislators into approving the new constitution and enacting agrarian reform legislation.

Independent media and critics of ethno-populist presidents have also been the subject of attacks. The Chávez administration, for example, confiscated some assets and declined to renew the license of RCTV, a leading independent TV channel and media firm. It also took over many media firms, used its tax agency to harass other media companies, and passed a law authorizing the state to break up large communication firms (Corrales 2010, 34). Morales similarly attacked the media, which he said was in league with the opposition, and he pushed for the passage of a 2010 anti-discrimination law that enables the government to shut down or fine news outlets that publish racist language even if they consist of quotes from news sources. Correa, meanwhile, harshly denounced and even sued some journalists, and he closed down or fined numerous television and radio stations and newspapers that were critical of him (de la Torre 2013). Correa also helped enact a controversial communications law in 2013 that critics argue endangers freedom of the press.

All of these measures have undermined democracy and exacerbated political polarization in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. According to Freedom House, Venezuela had a rating of 2 in terms of political rights and a 3 in term of civil liberties when Chávez took office in 1998 (a 1 is the best score on each of these indices). By 2012, his last full year in power, Venezuela earned a 5 in both of these categories (a 7 is the worst possible score on these indices). The Freedom House scores of Bolivia and Ecuador both began to deteriorate in the early 2000s before Morales and Correa came to power, but they have remained low during their administrations; both countries received a 3 in terms of political rights and civil liberties in 2016. By contrast, Toledo and Humala in Peru have shown more respect for democratic procedures. Indeed, Peru’s Freedom House score improved sharply after Toledo took power in 2001, dropping to a 2 in terms of political rights and a 3 in terms of civil liberties by 2003, and it remained at that level during the administration of Ollanta Humala. Thus, ethno-populist rule in Peru has not been associated with the democratic deterioration that it has experienced in Bolivia, Ecuador, and, especially, Venezuela.

Conclusion

As the preceding pages have shown, populist leaders in Latin America have embraced ethnic appeals in recent years. They have recruited indigenous and Afro-Latino candidates, they have invoked ethnic symbols, they have forged ties with indigenous and Afro-Latino organizations and movements, and they have embraced a wide range of traditional ethnic demands. They have done so in large part in order to take advantage of the growing ethnic consciousness in the region and to fuse together winning coalitions of white, mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-Latino voters.

Ethno-populists have a mixed legacy in terms of democracy. On the positive side, they have helped boost political participation and support for democracy among indigenous people and Afro-Latinos. They have promoted ethnic inclusion, ethnic rights, and ethnic equality. Moreover, the ethno-populists in Latin America, unlike Europe, have been ethnically inclusive and, as a result, they have not caused ethnic polarization. On the negative side, however, ethno-populist leaders have used traditional populist strategies that have undermined horizontal accountability, worsened political polarization, and weakened democracy in the region.

Although some of the most prominent ethno-populists in the region have died or given up power in recent years, it seems unlikely that ethno-populism will disappear anytime soon. Ethno-populism has proven to be an effective political strategy in countries where ethnic and
class cleavages coincide. In these countries, politicians have incentives to use ethnic as well as traditional populist appeals to woo members of marginalized ethnic groups. Moreover, as the Latin American cases illustrate, ethno-populist appeals do not have to be exclusionary. Indeed, where ethnic polarization is low, it is quite feasible for ethno-populists to assemble broad, multi-ethnic coalitions. As long as political and economic marginalization is widespread in Latin America and remains correlated with ethnicity, many politicians will continue to employ ethno-populist appeals and many voters will continue to respond to them.

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