Populism and authoritarianism
Kurt Weyland

After Philippe Schmitter depicted the twentieth century as the century of corporatism, the
new millennium seems to have ushered in the era of populism, as dramatically corroborated
by Donald Trump’s presidential victory in the global paragon of liberalism, the United States.
This form of personalistic, plebiscitarian rule had long had a strong foothold in Latin America.
The classical populism of Juan Perón, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Getúlio Vargas shaped the
political and socioeconomic trajectories of the major countries in the region. Even the
repressive military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s did not manage to eradicate populism,
which made a striking comeback after re-democratization. Similarly, populism survived the
drastic market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, even helping to enact them via the neoliberal
populism of Carlos Menem, Alberto Fujimori, and Fernando Collor de Mello. The backlash
against neoliberalism then gave rise to another wave of populism, this time in a leftwing,
nationalist variant, as exemplified by Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Néstor
and Cristina Kirchner.

While populism has remained a recurring phenomenon in Latin America, it has in recent
decades sprouted up in unexpected places as well, especially in Western Europe and the United
States. As the advanced industrialized countries have faced increasing economic constraints, new
social tensions and fissures, and the erosion of their long-entrenched catch-all parties, charismatic
leaders have encountered surprising room of political maneuver and growing mass audiences.
Outside these two main regions, prominent populist leaders have captured government power
in a smattering of countries across the globe, ranging from Turkey under Recep Tayyip
Erdoğan to Thailand under Thaksin Shinawatra and to Japan under Junichirō Koizumi

This upsurge of populism constitutes a sign of trouble for democracy. Populist leaders
usually rise as outsiders by criticizing the political establishment for failing to represent “the
people” and to govern on behalf of the common good. They thus take advantage of a sense of
exclusion and marginalization. Where these sentiments and resentments are widespread among
the citizenry, political parties obviously do not properly fulfill their role of interest articulation
and interest aggregation.

Some observers see populism as a corrective for these problems. They hope that the mass
mobilization effected by personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders will lead to the inclusion of disaffected
citizens and that in the future, political parties will act more faithfully as representatives of the people. Where populist leaders introduce frequent plebiscites or other mechanisms of direct democracy, political regimes could become more participatory and receptive to bottom-up initiatives.

But there are much darker scenarios as well. Because “the people” is a heterogeneous, amorphous aggregate, the citizenry faces great difficulty making meaningful use of direct-democratic institutions. In many of these fora, such as community councils, only minorities regularly participate, and these minorities are highly skewed due to self-selection. Plebiscites are often manipulated from the top as populist leaders impose suggestive question wording and whip up plebiscitarian acclamation for their own preferences through the “mobilization of bias.”

Populist leaders can use their captive mass support not only for perverting the (seemingly) direct-democratic institutions they create, but also for cementing and extending their own personal power. Claiming to embody the will of “the people,” they depict the checks and balances of liberal democracy as improper hindrances. They seek to dismantle these restraints against executive predominance, to take over other branches of government, and to undermine the autonomy of supposedly independent institutions, especially the courts. In a similar vein, they treat the political opposition not as legitimate competitors, but attack them as enemies. Last but not least, they seek to dominate and control civil society, to put pressure on the news media, and to flood the airwaves, especially TV, and nowadays social media with their own speeches and performances. In all of these ways, they seek to establish political hegemony.

These efforts hold a serious risk of undermining democracy and transforming it into an authoritarian regime. Historical experiences offer numerous confirmations of this danger. Latin America’s classical populism of the 1930s to 1950s was closely associated with non-democratic rule, and the radical populism during the recent pink tide ushered in competitive authoritarianism as well, which has hardened significantly in crisis-wracked Venezuela.

The present chapter argues that these deleterious developments were no accidents. Instead, populism has an inherent tendency to turn authoritarian (Weyland, 2013; see also Levitsky and Loxton, 2013), which arises from its definitional characteristics (cf. Weyland, 2001), as explained in section 2 below. Plebiscitarian mass support gives many personalistic leaders ample opportunities to augment their power and make a bid for hegemony. Where these leaders win office based not on conjunctural crises, which pass quickly, but promise to resolve deep-seated structural problems, they have good chances to perpetuate themselves in office.

But opportunity is only part of the explanation. Personalistic leaders give in to these authoritarian temptations because they – by nature – live dangerously and therefore seek to maximize their power for the sake of self-protection. After all, their mass support is fickle due to the absence of organizational linkages; it can melt away quickly. To compensate for this inherent weakness, populist leaders seek to create particularly intense connections to their followers. For this purpose, they deliberately make enemies in order to appear as heroic saviors who rescue “the people” from pernicious forces. To maintain and strengthen their backing, these politicians employ relentless attacks on the established “political class,” which they seek to push aside, if not destroy in political terms. Moreover, they thrive on polarization and confrontation when in office.

Of course, these adversaries do not sit still but try to defend their positions and privileges. Facing waves of attack, propelled by a groundswell of anger and resentment from a long-neglected citizenry, they often resort to drastic countermeasures, such as protests, business lockouts, and even coup attempts. As the conflict heats up, democracy suffers and runs serious risks, both of strangulation by the populist leader or of overthrow by the opposition, especially its supporters among the military.
Thus, populism’s threat to democracy constitutes a Catch-22: There is a serious risk of a descent into authoritarianism both if populist leaders achieve political success and if they suffer a striking failure. Historical experiences corroborate these double risks. Juan Perón, for instance, suffocated Argentine democracy in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for instance; then in 1955, he was dislodged by a military coup, and his unhappy country suffered a series of dictatorships that sought to forestall the populist chieftain’s return to power. Similarly, Thaksin Shinawatra governed in increasingly undemocratic ways, which helped to provoke a takeover by the armed forces. And after his sister won power, the same cycle repeated itself.

The chapter supports these arguments by examining first the historical trajectories of major populist experiences from various time periods and regions. Then it explains the main perspective, namely the theoretical reasons for populism’s strong association with authoritarianism. Section 3 contributes to the debate about the causes and conditions under which populist leaders manage to proceed along the path toward authoritarian rule. The penultimate section engages in a critical reflection about the much-discussed relationship of populism and fascism, and the conclusion summarizes the principal findings.

1. Historical trajectories

Classical populism in Latin America was born under authoritarian rule. Mexico’s Lázaro Cárdenas won the 1934 election as the head of the cartel party founded by post-revolutionary overlord Plutarco Calles in 1929. While his move toward populist mass mobilization was prompted by a falling-out with his erstwhile benefactor, the winner in this intra-elite struggle governed in a non-democratic fashion and ensured that his handpicked successor would emerge victorious from the unfair election of 1940. Getúlio Vargas took power in a coup in 1930 and in 1937 imposed a harsh dictatorship. He unexpectedly morphed into a populist for opportunistic reasons, facing democratic headwinds toward the end of WWII. After he failed to engineer his reelection in 1945, he regained power in the 1950 contest based on two political parties that he had founded during his authoritarian regime; one of these personal vehicles comprised patronage politicians who feasted on governmental largesse, and the other one rested on the state-corporatist organization of trade unions that Vargas had imposed under his dictatorship.

Similarly, Juan Perón rose to political influence and prominence under a military regime that had grabbed power in a 1943 coup. Once he had used social benefit programs to build a mass following, especially among the working class, he managed to survive a serious challenge from his military comrades and to win an unusually free and fair election in 1946. But this democratic success did not turn this ambitious populist leader into a democrat. Instead, he used the prerogatives of government to expand his political power, control societal organizations, especially the unions, and make life difficult for the opposition. Typically, he took advantage of his mass support to change the constitution and allow for his immediate reelection. During his second term, he turned more openly authoritarian, employed Peronist thugs to intimidate public opinion and attack the opposition, and attacked independent power centers in society, including the Catholic Church.

In these ways, Perón traced the typical path in which a populist leader who wins office in a democratic fashion then destroys democracy from the inside. Invoking support from “the people” as a justification, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders commonly try to fortify their own position, suspend the separation of powers, and drive the opposition out of the competitive arena. Because they control the administrative and coercive instruments of the state, they wield ample weapons for achieving their nefarious goals. For this reason, the desperate
opposition often sees no other way than to combat populists’ quest for political hegemony with authoritarian means as well, especially by instigating military coups – to which Perón fell prey in 1955, for instance.

Subsequent generations of populists have tried to follow this undemocratic playbook, and so has the opposition. For instance, Brazil’s populist leaders of the early 1960s, President João Goulart and ambitious aspirant Leonel Brizola, sought constitutional changes, probably to facilitate their own (re-)election; and their rhetorical attacks on socioeconomic and political elites helped to prompt a military coup that ended up bringing twenty-one years of dictatorship.

After the first wave of populist leaders to (re-)emerge under the fledgling democracies of the 1980s faced too precarious a position to push for authoritarian rule, the neoliberal populists of the 1990s resumed the attack on civilian competitive rule (Weyland, 2013: 25–26). Most prominently, Alberto Fujimori dispensed with the typical salami tactics and imposed autocracy with a self-coup in April 1992. Although strong international pressures achieved the restoration of democratic formalities, behind this façade the plebiscitarian leader continued to marshal and exercise power in a non-democratic fashion, as indicated by the second consecutive reelection that he engineered in 2000. But in his obsession with total predominance, Fujimori had hollowed out all institutional structures and sustained his rule through the crassest form of personal linkages, namely monetary bribes. This house of cards eventually collapsed in a monumental corruption scandal, which paved the way for Peru’s return to democracy.

Carlos Menem, and in the subsequent decade Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe, also put enormous pressure on democracy, governing by decree, packing the courts, and engineering immediate reelection via forcefully pursued constitutional changes. Because of their less persistent support base (which section 3 below will discuss); because of stronger institutional frameworks; and because of the counterweights that Menem faced inside his own Peronist movement, these neoliberal populists did not succeed in their push for a second consecutive reelection. Their departure from office nipped any potential slide of their countries into authoritarianism in the bud.

The countries that elected the last crop of populists, namely the Bolivarian leftists headed and coordinated by Hugo Chávez, have been distinctly less lucky. Like their Venezuelan role model and benefactor, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador parlayed their landslide electoral victories into new constitutions that weakened checks and balances, concentrated power in the presidency, and prepared their own reelection. Cementing their political hegemony with all means and tricks and putting the thumbscrews on the opposition, the media, and civil society, these personalistic plebiscitarian leaders constructed competitive-authoritarian regimes, which in the Venezuelan case turned openly repressive and autocratic. Manuel Zelaya in Honduras followed the same script, though with less success and eventual catastrophic failure; and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua achieved the same goal, albeit in a more blatantly paralegal fashion. In an era when liberal democracy seemed to have made great strides toward consolidation in the region, the emergence of Bolivarian populism brought a surprising regression in a group of countries (Weyland, 2013). Thus, to the present day, Latin American populism has maintained its association with authoritarianism.

Most of Europe’s populist leaders, such as Marine Le Pen, have not (yet?) won government power and have therefore lacked the opportunity to employ the typical populist strategy and dismantle democracy from the inside. But Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi has been accused of hollowing out democracy (Pissowotzki, 2003; Viroli, 2011). Greece’s Alexis Tsipras, who entered a governing coalition with an antidemocratic party of the radical right, “has proposed several laws that could limit the space for political opposition by increasing state control of education and the media” (Mudde, 2016: 29). Podemos in Spain has put a great deal of
pressure on independent journalists to suppress critical commentary (Mateo, 2017); and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán quickly used his massive electoral triumph of 2010 to transform his country into an illiberal democracy (Rupnik, 2016: 80–81). The more Orbán follows his new friend and apparent role model, Vladimir Putin of Russia, the greater is the risk that – despite the rescue efforts of the European Union – Hungary may eventually slide toward competitive-authoritarian rule.

Populist autocracy has achieved a clear breakthrough in Turkey, where the moderate Islamist party headed by charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initially seemed to promote greater democracy by pushing aside the tutelage of the secularist military. But as soon as this populist politician had marginalized this dangerous veto player, he undertook a determined quest for political hegemony (Selçuk, Forthcoming). By controlling the courts, dominating the media, and clamping down on civil society, especially after the oppositional mass protests of 2013, Erdoğan was systematically undermining democracy. Then he resolutely took advantage of a failed coup attempt in July 2016 to initiate a truly massive purge of state, politics, and society, which has effectively turned Turkey into an authoritarian regime (Karaveli, 2016).

A very similar process unfolded in Thailand under Thaksin Shinawatra, the first politician who employed a populist strategy and used his massive popular support to establish his hegemony in the party system, undermine independent accountability institutions, intimidate the media, and try to control the military. But fear of politicization inside the armed forces, combined with strident opposition from the urban middle class, prompted a coup that overthrew Thaksin’s “democratic authoritarianism” (Pongsudhirak, 2003; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008). When his sister Yingluck resumed Thaksin’s populist approach, remobilized his support base, and won office in 2011, the same cycle played out a second time and culminated in her forceful eviction in 2014 (Prasirtsuk, 2015). The Thai case thus demonstrates populism’s double association with authoritanism: Personalistic plebiscitarian leaders inherently have autocratic tendencies, and because they restrict the opposition’s chances to combat them with democratic means, they induce their adversaries to resort to extra-constitutional mechanisms as well.

2. Main approach

What explains this common association of populism and authoritarianism? The origin lies in the very concept of populism, which is best defined “as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001: 14; further discussion in Weyland, 2017). Accordingly, a core feature of populism is its weak institutionalization. This strategy for winning and exercising power revolves around personalistic leadership as its central axis, and personalistic leaders connect with their followers in quasi-direct, non-organizational ways. Nowadays, they appeal to their supporters via the electronic mass media and mobilize them via frequent elections and plebiscites. They build only flimsy electoral vehicles that they completely dominate, for instance by determining the selection of candidates from the top down, at will.¹

The strong aversion to institutionalization reflects the main goal of populist leaders, namely to guarantee and augment their personal autonomy and power. This goal is in line with the preferences of their followers, who support the leader as a bold, powerful agent for transforming the sociopolitical status quo. To bring the change that populists’ mass base craves, these leaders need to act like transgressive heroes, not organizational functionaries hemmed in by institutional procedures and structures.
With this lack of institutionalization, populism relies on dynamism but is exposed to great volatility. Passionate appeals to the sentiments and resentments of population sectors that have long felt neglected and excluded can allow personalistic leaders to rise meteorically and quickly overwhelm their competitors in the electoral arena; and after they win office, determined attacks on adversaries and bold measures to resolve problems can further boost their support.

Yet while populist leaders can achieve amazing political success, they can also lose their mass support quickly when their miracle cures fail. Peru’s populist Alan García, for instance, enjoyed sky-high popularity in 1986, when his heterodox economic program temporarily reduced inflation while stimulating growth; but when this ill-conceived plan imploded in 1987 and hyperinflation erupted in 1988, his ratings fell into the single digits, exposing him to a serious risk of falling to a military coup.

Thus, populist leaders live dangerously. In the quest for maximizing their own influence and independence, they dispense with cumbersome institution building and rely on their personal appeal. But while this audacious strategy promises to engineer unprecedented political predominance, it also risks leading to a striking political meltdown. When their charisma fades, the followers may abandon the leaders as quickly as they jumped on the bandwagon during their initial upsurge. Operating without the safety net provided by organizational discipline and cohesion, populist politicians can suffer catastrophic failure.

To diminish this grave risk, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders resort to political means that propel them in an authoritarian direction. Because they lack organizational command over their followers, they compensate by charging up the intensity of their quasi-direct linkages (Weyland, 2001: 13–14). They try to stress their extraordinary capacities, if not charisma, by depicting themselves as the heroic saviors of “the people.” For this purpose, they dramatize existing problems, loudly blame their competitors, and deliberately make enemies. To win especially fervent backing, they deliberately turn politics from normal democratic competition into an epic struggle between the forces of good and evil.

In the eyes of the leaders and their followers, this titanic struggle justifies and requires the use of all means, even if it transgresses the official institutional rules. After all, formalistic niceties cannot block measures that, allegedly, are indispensable for carrying out the will of the people and promoting the common good against nefarious foes. Therefore, populist leaders incessantly seek to expand their power, take over the other branches of government, control or dismantle independent agencies, dominate or silence the mass media, and colonize or intimidate all relevant groupings in civil society. They pursue these goals by employing all the existing prerogatives of the executive branch, by pushing power-concentrating constitutional reforms, and by resorting to an ingenious variety of paralegal maneuvers and tricks.

The latter tactic amounts to “discriminatory legalism” (Weyland, 2013: 23–25; see also Corrales, 2011: 128–129). Once populist leaders control the different branches of government and agencies of the state, they can use standard administrative rules and procedures in a targeted way to put pressure on, intimidate, or eliminate their adversaries in politics and society. For instance, they subject critical newspapers to tax audits and use accusations of corruption against opposition politicians – while exempting their own supporters from the equal application of the law. In this fashion, they use formally legal measures for discriminatory political purposes, as weapons against their enemies.

This discriminatory legalism poses a serious dilemma for the opponents of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. If they follow the official procedures and defend themselves to secure their rights, they stand no chance. Because the leader controls administrative agencies and the courts, there is no fair recourse against governmental harassment; instead, trumped-up charges can easily land these victims in prison. There are only two ways out. First, they can flee from
this discriminatory legalism into exile, a path that so many opposition politicians have felt compelled to take, from the anti-Peronists of the 1950s to prominent critics of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales in the 2000s.

Second, they can counter-attack. But because populist leaders are determined to maintain hegemony over the official institutional arena, regular political participation offers very little chance of success, as, for instance, the opposition against Venezuela’s populist leader and his successor has painfully learned. This blockage seems to leave no other way out than attempts to dislodge the monopolistic chief executive with extra-institutional, perhaps even extra-constitutional means. In despair, the opposition has frequently resorted to protests, business strikes, or even military coups. Tragically, thus, populism unleashes authoritarian tendencies in two ways, namely via the power-maximizing efforts of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders and via the defensive efforts of the opposition to stop this concerted quest for hegemony.

The latter scenario played out in Honduras in 2009, where conservative party insider Manuel Zelaya had surprisingly adopted a populist political strategy after winning the presidency in 2005. After becoming an ally of Hugo Chávez, he seemed to follow the Bolivarian script by pushing for a constituent assembly that would have allowed him to concentrate power and prepare his own reelection. This apparent emulation of the Venezuelan scenario, which Bolivia’s Morales and Ecuador’s Correa had replicated as well, created deep fears among Honduras’ political establishment, which controlled Congress, the courts, and the military leadership and which used these democratic institutional bastions for determined efforts to block Zelaya’s plan. Because the pushy president failed to comply with Congressional rulings and court orders and sought to force through a plebiscite, the armed forces finally evicted this latecomer to populism. This coup rocked Honduran democracy, which took years to recover (Ruhl, 2010).

With even more blatantly authoritarian consequences, Argentina for decades was notorious for this pattern of populists being evicted by repeated military coups, especially in 1930, 1955, and 1976. Similarly, left-leaning populist João Goulart was overthrown in 1964, which ushered in twenty-one years of dictatorship in Brazil. Thailand suffered the same kind of fate twice in short order when its first populist leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, was overthrown in 2006 and his sister Yingluck, who resumed his populist strategy soon thereafter, ran afoul of fierce military opposition in 2014 as well (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 77–79; Prasirtsuk, 2015). Thus, populism tends to lead to authoritarianism not only when personalistic plebiscitarian leaders achieve strong, lasting political success, but also when they suffer dramatic defeats.

Given the often tragic consequences of these two-faced risks, it is important to highlight that the starting point of populism’s descent into authoritarianism, namely leaders’ systematic attempt to concentrate power, control all independent forces, and destroy the opposition, results from a combination of opportunities and challenges. Ample mass support gives ambitious chief executives the leverage to aggrandize their influence and autonomy. Yet they take advantage of this strength because they fear falling prey to the congenital weakness of populism, the fickleness of its unorganized, uninstitutionalized mass base.

Aware of the precarious nature of their political sustenance, populist leaders live in fear. Ironically, their attempts to mitigate this problem exacerbate the risks they face from other sides. As they try to strengthen their mass support through polarization and confrontation, they offend powerful establishment sectors. To prove their heroism and rally their supporters, they deliberately make and even search for enemies. This daring strategy, driven by the very nature of populism, often sets in motion a dangerous, self-reinforcing dynamic of provocation, challenge, and combat – which does enormous damage to liberal democracy and propels populism’s slide toward authoritarianism.
This destructive escalation, which populist leaders systematically provoke, is obvious in high-profile cases of populism. When Juan Perón, for instance, saw his mass support threatened by an economic downturn in the early 1950s, he started or aggravated conflicts with elite sectors, the Catholic Church, and recalcitrant segments of the military (Waldmann, 1974: 250–254) – which then conspired to overthrow him in 1955. Similarly, during the rocky start of his presidency, Hugo Chávez attacked the sociopolitical establishment, incurring ferocious opposition from the prior governing parties and from major groupings in civil society, especially business organizations and trade unions. Because the populist firebrand dominated the electoral arena, these forces resorted to a plethora of strikes, protests, and even a coup attempt in 2002. In turn, because Chávez had powerful enemies and deliberately made enemies, it made sense from his perspective to extend and fortify his overwhelming control of the Venezuelan political system. The resulting vicious circle has, after many years of escalation and retaliation, pushed the country into a competitive-authoritarian regime, which in recent years has ever more blatantly resorted to open repression.

Despite the stark differences in context and the leaders’ divergent ideology, Turkey’s Erdoğan has acted upon a similar mixture of incentives and constraints. His strong support among conservative Islamist sectors has allowed this populist leader to cement his predominant position, and the threat posed by potential veto players has induced him to use these opportunities. Viewed distrustfully by the secularist military, he has tried to establish his unchallengeable control, concentrate power in the presidency, and marginalize the political opposition. The overbearing leader has intensified these efforts after falling out with the Gülen movement, his prior ally against the armed forces. Fearing infiltration and eventual takeover by this shady network, he used the opportunity provided by the coup attempt of July 2016 to purge anybody with any (even the faintest) connections to the Gülenists – and crack down on a wide range of other critics as well. The typical combination of opportunities and challenges has thus led this populist leader to push his country far toward authoritarianism.2

The fundamental point here is that populism provides leaders not only with opportunities to move in an undemocratic direction – which would imply that their main motivation arises from personal power hunger (see, e.g., Karaveli, 2016: 125). Instead, the logic of populism compels personalistic plebiscitarian leaders to expand their power and attack enemies. The fickleness of their mass support induces them to engage in a “fuite en avant” – a headlong rush to flee forward. The congenital weakness of populism gives them urgent incentives to enhance their strength. These efforts to maximize their influence, which undermine and eventually destroy democracy, are prompted by the predictable challenges that a populist strategy entails. Thus, the tendency toward authoritarianism is inherent in the very logic of populism. That is why the strangulation of democracy from the inside, by an elected leader, is such a frequent outcome of this high-risk political strategy.

3. Critical debates: what are the crucial factors?

The preceding explanation of the logic of populism raises an important question: If authoritarian impulses are inherent in populism, yet populism constitutes a dangerous path for political leaders, then what factors condition the chances of personalistic plebiscitarian politicians to achieve sufficient success? Why do some leaders manage to stay in power long enough to advance toward authoritarian rule, whereas other fall prey to the conflicts they fan?

The institutionalism prevailing in contemporary political science highlights features of the party system and the system of government. For instance, populism has achieved greater political success under presidentialism, where direct popular elections for the chief executive
can more easily be swayed by plebiscitarian tactics and charismatic appeals. In parliamentary systems, the political sustenance of the chief executive depends on fairly reliable support from political parties. The resulting premium on party organization and discipline is antithetical to the uninstitutionalized nature of populism. In his party’s short passage through government power in the early 2000s, Austrian populist Jörg Haider was stymied by the resulting tensions (Heinisch, 2003; Fallend, 2012).

But while making a contribution to scholarly understanding, institutionalism is excessively proximate in its explanations by taking the existing institutional configuration as a given. Populist leaders, however, are change agents, and in their determined quest for boosting their own power, they often revamp the institutional framework. Notably, that was the first priority of Latin America’s recent crop of Bolivarian populists, who used the call for a constituent assembly as their main pledge during the electoral campaign. Other personalistic plebiscitarian leaders first consolidate their political position and then push for an institutional transformation, as Turkey’s Erdoğan has done with his repeated push for strengthening the presidential office. Most importantly perhaps, populist leaders of all stripes, ranging from neoliberal Alberto Fujimori to anti-neoliberal Hugo Chávez, immediately set out to reshape the party system, especially by trying to destroy the old establishment parties. For all of these reasons, the explanatory power of institutionalism is limited.

Economic factors and conjunctures play a more important role. Clearly, populist leaders find it much easier to maintain and extend their mass support if the economy is performing well and they have largesse to distribute. Some new presidents even use their honeymoon period to impose adjustment in the hope of ushering in an era of high growth, as Latin America’s neoliberal populists did in the early 1990s. Whether these market reforms achieved their intended outcomes then depended on context factors, such as the availability of investment capital and the performance of the global economy. Fujimori and Carlos Menem, for instance, were politically hurt by the international crises and the regional downturn of the late 1990s. By contrast, Latin America’s Bolivarian populists benefited enormously from the global commodities boom during the new millennium. Arguably, Chávez owed his political survival to the dramatic upsurge of global oil prices in 2003/04. He won a recall referendum demanded by the opposition only after – and because – the sudden influx of extra revenues allowed his government to roll out massive social programs, which quickly boosted his initially low approval ratings. In conclusion, economic structures and conjunctures, which are largely out of the control of populist leaders, significantly shape their political fate and thus affect the damage they do to democracy.

These economic factors are far from determinant, however. After international hydrocarbon prices plummeted in 2014, for instance, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa faced much more serious challenges to his populist regime than did Evo Morales: Mass protests in major cities contributed to the Ecuadorian caudillo’s decision to forgo another reelection, whereas his Bolivian counterpart, who has avoided such contention, is scheming to perpetuate himself in power by undoing a narrow loss in a plebiscite. The main reason: While both leaders bolstered their political position with massive windfalls from hydrocarbon exports, Morales has a strong additional base of support due to his indigenous background. Ethnic identity forges a firm bond between the Bolivian leader and many of his followers, which gives him much greater immunity against conjunctural fluctuations. This ethnopopulism (Madrid, 2008) has greater staying power than Correa’s more performance-based technopopulism (De la Torre, 2013).

Social cleavage arguments (seminal discussion in Lipset and Rokkan 1967) thus help explain the political success of populist leaders, which conditions their countries’ slide into authoritarian rule. Some types of political issues and problems lend themselves to more durable
linkages between leaders and followers than others, which are particularly brittle and fleeting. In this vein, the political experiences of Latin America’s neoliberal populists suggest that economic crises offer only temporary sustenance for personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. While an economic collapse such as hyperinflation allows a daring outsider to engineer a quick turnaround, restore stability, and thus win tremendous mass support, the very resolution of the crisis soon diminishes the salience of this issue. When popular gratitude therefore fades, neoliberal populists have difficulty finding new reasons to justify their permanence in office. No wonder that Argentina’s Menem and Colombia’s Uribe did not manage to extend their rule beyond two terms. The political failure of these populist leaders then allowed their countries to reverse the deterioration of democracy that their governments had effected and to avoid any descent into authoritarian rule.

By contrast, social problems and class cleavages provide a longer-lasting basis for populist appeals. Latin America’s Bolivarian populists, for instance, politicized social exclusion, especially large-scale poverty and stark inequality. Determined government action can bring improvements on these fronts, but even during the commodities boom of the early 2000s, it is impossible to resolve these longstanding issues. Consequently, ambitious leaders can claim the need for continued re-elections so that they can further extend the progress that they have already achieved. This persuasive argument has helped the region’s leftwing populists to cling to power longer, on average, than their earlier rightwing counterparts managed. The unfortunate consequence is, however, that Bolivarian populists have done much more severe damage to democracy than most of their neoliberal predecessors did. Whereas only Fujimori installed a competitive-authoritarian regime, Chávez and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega enacted such regime change, Correa and Morales are well advanced along this path, and Nicolás Maduro has turned Venezuela into a full, repressive autocracy (Weyland, 2013).

Cleavages that involve citizens’ fundamental identities constitute even more durable bases of support for populist leadership. Morales’ indigenous descent, for instance, helps to guarantee him overwhelming backing from the Aymara and Quechua in the countryside. Similarly, Chávez drew some political payoffs from his partially African heritage. Even Fujimori’s Japanese background augmented his political capital. While differing from Peru’s mestizo majority, Fujimori offered a striking contrast to the lily-white Lima elite that had long run the country, as embodied by his opponents in the 1990 and the 1995 elections, cosmopolitan novelist Mario Vargas Llosa and former United Nations head Javier Pérez de Cuéllar.

Similarly, religiosity provides a strong foundation for Erdoğan’s populism in Turkey. After Mustafa Kemal Atatürk pushed Islam out of the public sphere and after the military for decades guaranteed this enforced secularism, Islamists from the 1970s onward won intense support for their efforts to restore Turkey’s Muslim heritage and give the religion a more prominent role in society and politics. Yet while these appeals were vote-getters, they also proved dangerous, landing Erdoğan in prison for a while and provoking the court-ordered dissolution of the party to which he belonged. Tactical moderation then enabled this personalistic plebiscitarian leader to lower this political risk, yet enjoy intense support from a strong plurality of Turkish voters. While far from unconditional, this backing allowed Erdoğan to dismantle the military’s stranglehold over Turkish democracy, only to undermine civilian competitive rule with his incessant efforts to concentrate power and establish political hegemony. The failed coup of mid-2016 then served as a golden opportunity to finish this wrecking job by vanquishing the president’s remaining enemies and by suppressing or intimidating any critics.

In sum, the types of issues and cleavages that aspiring populists can use to garner mass support have an important impact on their political fortunes; correspondingly, they condition the decay of democracy and advance toward authoritarianism that emerges from the very logic of populism. Pressing conjunctural crises offer only a temporary base for populism; therefore,
the political damage tends to remain limited. By contrast, structural problems such as poverty and social inequality and, especially, identities such as ethnicity and religion provide firmer foundations for populist rule. While personalistic plebiscitarian leadership remains inherently fickle, as the ups and downs experienced by Chávez, Morales, and Erdoğan show, their stronger political position has brought more sustained political regression and an ever more obvious descent into authoritarianism.

4. Critical reflection: the differences between populism and fascism

The analysis so far has focused on the governing experiences of populist leaders, which create the greatest risk for authoritarian involutions. Consequently, the chapter has mainly examined populism in Latin America and Asia, specifically Turkey and Thailand. What about Europe, where populism has arguably made the greatest advances in recent years — though recently trumped by Trump’s triumph in the U.S.?

Much of Europe’s new wave of populism emanated from the radical right. In fact, many authors subsume reactionary extremists under the label of populism (e.g., Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2007; forceful criticism in Pappas, 2016). After all, many of these leaders appeal to “the people” of the titular nation with attacks on “foreigners,” migrants, and refugees, lately with special animus against Muslims. Given the fierce resentments and radical ideologies propagated by these leaders, the authoritarian tendencies of this so-called extreme-right populism look particularly obvious.

The present chapter advocates a stricter conceptualization of populism, however, which excludes rightwing extremists. According to the concept of populism presented in section 2, this political strategy revolves around personalistic leadership. To be more precise, “populism rests on pure, opportunistic personalism – as distinct from ideocratic personalism, where the leader embodies a dogmatic ideology and acts as its monopolistic interpreter” (Weyland, 2017: 27). It is typical of populism that it lacks ideological definition. There have been populists of the left and of the right; contemporary Latin America, for instance, has seen a series of neoliberal populists quickly followed by “socialist,” nationalist populists. In fact, individual leaders have drawn on different ideological elements or shifted their position quite clearly over time. For instance, during his early years in Venezuela’s presidency, Hugo Chávez had both determined left-wingers and an Argentine fascist, Norberto Ceresole, as his close, personal advisers. Similarly, the Peronist movement has for decades included a total ideological hodge-podge, ranging from the radical left to the extreme right. Many of the Montoneros of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, who took inspiration from Che Guevara and initiated a guerrilla war, had emerged from reactionary, nationalist, Catholic, and anti-Semitic circles (Germani, 1978: 273).

By contrast, the personalistic leaders of fascist movements design ambitious ideological edifices that embody a specific worldview. Anchoring a counter-movement, this ideology is clearest in the negative; that is, its categorical rejection of Marxism and liberalism, as well as of broader ideational currents such as cosmopolitanism, universalism, legalism, individualism, egalitarianism, and most fundamentally rationality. By contrast, fascism embraces militant nationalism, forceful collectivism, traditionalist communitarianism, charismatic authority, and a cult of violence. While there are internal divergences, for instance on the role of private business and the meaning of “socialism,” these fundamental ideological commitments provide the driving goals of fascism and provide it with a powerful transformational impetus and dynamism. Fascists fight for a cause and follow their leader because he embodies this cause.

Populism has much less ambitious goals. The goals that the leader proclaims remain vague and nebulous; therefore they can shift. Hugo Chávez, for instance, morphed from anti-neoliberal
nationalist to twenty-first-century socialist and the self-adopted son of Fidel Castro. Yet even after this metamorphosis, who knew what twenty-first-century socialism actually meant? In fact, did the Bolivarian leader himself know? The pronouncements of populist leaders do not add up to anything resembling a systematic ideology; instead, they constitute the kind of broad, loosely integrated orientations, sentiments, and resentments that Juan Linz (1964) labeled mentality.

Interestingly, for Linz, mentalities were constitutive elements of authoritarianism, the regime type that – according to this essay – populism tends toward. By contrast, fascism created totalitarian regimes, which are guided by clear, fairly coherent, systematic ideologies. This association with different regime types provides another indication of the differences between populism and fascism.

Europe’s radical right traces back its genealogy to the fascism of the interwar years. At its founding, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National incorporated people with nostalgia for the collaborationist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain (Pappas, 2016: 25). Similarly, before Jörg Haider’s takeover in 1986, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs included supporters of the country’s Nazi-Anschluss of 1938. Ideologically driven, these extremist parties and movements did not mind paying the political price for their stubborn commitments, namely marginalization in the political wilderness.

How different is populism! Unconstrained by clear principles, personalistic plebiscititarian leaders flexibly adjust to prevailing opportunities and challenges, all in the quest for maximizing their electoral support. Populism’s lodestar is opportunism. Leaders will do whatever increases their chances for expanding their political influence and moving closer to government power. Accordingly, they are willing to adjust their orientations and promises. In ideational terms, populism therefore resembles a chameleon (Taggart, 2000: chap. 1).

Consequently, rightwing parties and movements can only turn populist if they dilute their extremist ideology fundamentally and turn it into a loose, vague mentality (Mammone, 2009); correspondingly, they switch from pursuing a principled cause to the opportunistic goal of winning power. Typically, this qualitative change coincides with a generational transition, such as the FPÖ’s takeover by Jörg Haider in 1986 or the anointment of Marine Le Pen as leader of the FN. As those who imbibed interwar fascism in their youth and still carry it in their bones step aside or are pushed out of the way, a new crop of leaders take the helm who can proceed with much greater flexibility. Therefore they discard paleo-fascism and focus exclusively on contemporary issues (on Le Pen, see Reynié, 2016: 51–56). Marine Le Pen ostentatiously marked this qualitative change from rightwing extremism to populism by expelling her own father from the party that he himself had founded. Whereas Jean-Marie spent his political life marking position and giving testimony of his cause, his daughter wants nothing more than to capture the French presidency (Shields, 2013).

The resulting risk for European democracy is that with the transition to populism, rightwing parties become electable. And although they have abandoned their extremist ideologies and do not hold the risk of totalitarianism, the main argument of this chapter suggests that their accession to power would create problems and danger for democracy. As mentioned above, the conservative populism of Silvio Berlusconi diminished democratic quality in Italy. Even more clearly, the rightwing populism of Viktor Orbán has resolutely transformed Hungary into an illiberal democracy, and Poland’s new government is quickly emulating this path (Rupnik, 2016: 80–81).

While the majoritarian position of Orbán’s party and the rise of an even more reactionary movement overwhelmed any resistance to the chief executive’s power grab in Hungary, Polish opposition parties and civil society are putting up a spirited fight, however. Thus, many European polities command greater institutional strength and boast a more firmly grounded pluralism than is the case in other regions of the world. These strengths prevail especially in
the North-Western half of the Old continent. Thus, the authoritarian tendencies inherent in populism will face stronger opposition forces and are less likely to come to the fore and carry the day. The rise of populism threatens the quality of democracy, but is unlikely to undermine the maintenance of civilian competitive rule as such.

In particular, what Europe does not have to fear is a resurrection of fascism. The dramatic reverse wave of the interwar years will not recur. Where populist movements have a chance of winning government power, they have that chance only because they have discarded the reactionary ideology that gave them their initial imprint. Marine Le Pen and the new crop of populists in other countries clearly are right-wingers; but fascists they are not.

The same arguments apply to the current frontline in the global wave of populism, namely the U.S., which unexpectedly elected a consummate populist, Donald Trump. As this plebiscitarian leader shares the autocratic tendencies inherent in populism, observers see risks to democracy (Bangel, 2016). While institutional conflict has already erupted, well-entrenched checks and balances will probably contain Trump’s attacks and limit their damage to democratic quality. Moreover, U.S. civil society with its firm liberal, anti-authoritarian currents poses a strong counterweight to this personalistic president, whose unorganized mass base, living dispersed across the hinterland, is difficult to mobilize for pressure tactics. Thus, as in Western European democracies such as Austria and Italy, the unprecedented irruption of populism in the U.S. will probably not succeed in moving the polity in an authoritarian direction.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted and explained the authoritarian tendencies that are inherent in populism. Out of its inner logic, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders incessantly try to concentrate power, expand their influence, dismantle checks and balances, take over independent institutions, attack the opposition as enemies, and control the mass media and civil society. Their mass support and their systematic usage of majoritarian instruments, such as frequent elections and plebiscites, give them ample opportunities for establishing political predominance, if not hegemony. And the polarization and confrontation that they employ to intensify their uninstitutionalized and therefore fickle bonds to their followers create political risks that induce them to extend their power. As populist leaders deliberately make enemies to prove their indispensability as heroic saviors and to rally their supporters, they start fights and fuel conflicts that expose them to danger. Thus, to compensate for the institutional deficiency of populism with extraordinary political strength, they feel compelled to grab more and more power. In order not to fall prey to the congenital fluidity of populism, they try to destroy any competitor in society and politics (including inside their own movement) and to establish a monopolistic position.

While leftwing populists nowadays campaign with direct-democratic promises and institute participatory institutions, they effectively empower the citizenry at best at the local level, for instance via community councils (Rhodes-Purdy, 2017). At the national level, they operate participatory institutions only in a way that suits their opportunistic political needs. When a direct-democratic mechanism threatens their predominance, as opposition demands for recall referenda in Venezuela did in 2003 and 2016, they stall or simply block; yet when such an instrument promises to boost their power further, they eagerly jump on the opportunity, as Evo Morales did in 2008. In a pattern of fundamental politicization that resembles the discriminatory legalism mentioned above, leftwing populists use participatory institutions only where and when it serves them, yet not when it endangers their stranglehold on power. What could better exemplify the opportunism that is constitutive of populism as a political strategy?
Kurt Weyland

Notes
1 Where populist leaders revive the legacies of an earlier charismatic movement, as in Argentine Peronism, they take over the respective political parties, bend them to their will, and de-institutionalize them.
2 This paragraph is based on conversations with academics and citizens in Istanbul in July 2016.
3 For Latin America, Germani (1978) systematically explains the differences between populism and fascism.
4 This is the main conclusion of a book project that Raúl Madrid and I are editing, based on the conference on “President Trump’s Populism: Lessons from Europe and Latin America,” held at the University of Texas at Austin on 22 September 2017. Cambridge University Press will publish this book at the beginning of 2019.

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