Populism’s relationship to democratic regimes is, by most accounts, double-edged. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, for example, describe populism as a “friend and foe” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 15–25) of democracy. On the one hand, populist mobilization of marginalized sectors can serve as an important corrective to overly elitist or exclusionary democratic regimes; on the other hand, the hyper-majoritarianism and plebiscitarism that is inherent to populism tend to undermine liberal democratic institutions, particularly those protecting individual and minority rights. In other words, populism is simultaneously inclusionary and illiberal.

This chapter argues that the regime consequences of Latin American populism have varied over time. During the so-called “classical” populist period, in the early to mid-twentieth century, many populists emerged in a context of restricted suffrage, limited associational rights, and frequent repression of the popular sectors; in such a context, successful populism frequently resulted in important (if sometimes short-lived) steps toward democratization (Collier and Collier 1991). In the contemporary period, by contrast, most populists emerge under real (if flawed) democracies. Thus, although contemporary populism mobilizes and empowers previously marginalized groups, its effects on political regimes are less democratizing. Indeed, successful populism almost always triggers a slide into competitive authoritarianism, or regimes in which democratic institutions exist but the playing field is skewed against the opposition (Levitsky and Way 2010; Levitsky and Loxton 2013).

This chapter examines the link between populism and competitive authoritarianism in Latin America.1 We argue that successful populists push fragile democracies toward competitive authoritarianism because (1) they are political outsiders with little experience with (or stake in) liberal democratic institutions, (2) they earn an electoral mandate to bury the existing elite and its institutions, and (3) they almost always confront institutions of horizontal accountability controlled by established parties. Lacking experience, facing hostile legislatures and courts, and armed with a mandate to depose the old elite, newly elected populists often assault institutions of horizontal accountability, triggering a constitutional crisis. Presidents who prevail in these showdowns gain unchecked control over state institutions, which allows them to skew the playing field against opponents. Almost invariably, the result is competitive authoritarianism. In the pages that follow, we present our theoretical argument and then illustrate it through an
examination of three cases: Peru under Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, and Ecuador under Rafael Correa.

**Populism and competitive authoritarianism**

We define populism as the top-down mobilization of subaltern constituencies, usually by a personalistic outsider, against the entire political and/or economic elite. Following Barr (2009: 30–36), populism may be measured in terms of three key characteristics. First, populists are political outsiders, or individuals who rise to political prominence from outside the established party system. Second, populism is personalistic. Populists establish direct, personal linkages with voters, largely circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation. Indeed, the movements they spawn are often named after the leader (e.g., peronismo, fujimorismo, chavismo). Third, populists mobilize mass support via anti-establishment appeals, positioning themselves as representatives of “the people” in opposition to the entire elite.

An anti-establishment appeal is the *sine qua non* of populism. Thus, cases in which an anti-establishment appeal is combined with both outsider status and personalistic linkage may be considered instances of full populism. The combination of an anti-establishment appeal with one of the two other elements produces two partial or diminished subtypes of populism. Political insiders who abandon established parties and make personalistic, anti-establishment appeals (e.g., Fernando Collor; Rafael Caldera in the 1990s) may, following Barr (2009), be labeled *maverick populists*. Alternatively, anti-establishment outsiders who emerge “from below,” via non-personalistic social movements (e.g., Evo Morales), may be described as *movement populists*.

Populism’s consequences for democracy are double-edged (de la Torre 2000; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). On the one hand, populism is inherently inclusionary. Populists mobilize marginalized or excluded sectors of society, including workers and sometimes peasants in the “classical” populist period (Collier and Collier 1991), the informal poor in Fujimori’s Peru and Chávez’s Venezuela, and indigenous groups in contemporary Bolivia. When they ascend to power, populists tend to displace existing elites and open up the political establishment to new or excluded actors. They “give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 21) by placing new issues on the public agenda, appointing representatives of previously marginalized groups to positions of state authority, or creating new institutional channels of access to the state. They may also extend new rights, implement redistributive social and economic policies, and challenge existing social and cultural hierarchies through discourse and a range of symbolic gestures. Such measures are often said to have a democratizing effect on societies: they erode longstanding social hierarchies, empower subaltern groups, and reduce the social and cultural gap between elites and masses (de la Torre 2000).

On the other hand, populism’s consequences for liberal democracy are more ambiguous. Where pre-existing regimes are oligarchic or authoritarian, populism may have a democratizing effect. In the classical populist period, for example, populist governments often extended basic rights — such as suffrage and workers’ right to organize — that had long been denied to much of the population (Collier and Collier 1991). Where regimes are already democratic, however, populism’s democratizing effects are more limited. Populist governments may be inclusionary, in that they give voice to under-represented groups, but in terms of liberal democracy, they tend to be more foe than friend. Indeed, in contemporary Latin America, successful populists almost invariably trigger a slide into competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Loxton 2012; 2013).
Competitive authoritarian regimes are those in which formal democratic institutions exist and are meaningful, but in which incumbent abuse skews the playing field to such an extent that the opposition’s ability to compete is seriously compromised (Levitsky and Way 2010). Such regimes are competitive in that opposition forces use elections to contest seriously (and occasionally, successfully) for power. Yet competition is markedly unfair. Incumbents politicize state institutions such as the judiciary, security forces, tax agencies, and electoral authorities and use them to weaken their opponents. Government critics face various forms of harassment, including surveillance and blackmail; “legal” persecution for defamation, tax violations, or corruption; attacks by government-sponsored mobs; and occasional arrest or exile. Moreover, the government’s abuse of state resources and bullying and co-optation of private media results in highly unequal access to media and finance, tilting the playing field against the opposition. Well-known cases of competitive authoritarianism in Latin America include Argentina under Juan Perón, Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Dominican Republic under Joaquín Balaguer, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, Peru under Alberto Fujimori, and Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.

Populism tends to push fragile democracies into competitive authoritarianism for at least three reasons. First, because populists are political outsiders, they have little experience with institutions of representative democracy. Most career politicians spend years working within legislatures or subnational governments, and in the process acquire the skills necessary to make those institutions work, such as negotiation and coalition-building. Moreover, because the institutions of representative democracy are their livelihood, professional politicians have a stake in their survival. Populist outsiders, by contrast, are political amateurs: Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Jorge Serrano in Guatemala, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and Lucio Gutiérrez and Rafael Correa in Ecuador had never held elected office before winning the presidency. Without experience in the workaday politics of Congress, the judiciary, or subnational government, outsiders often lack the skill, patience, and commitment needed to pursue their goals within existing democratic institutions. Not having been socialized into democratic politics, they may also lack a normative commitment to those institutions. Indeed, every Latin American president to close Congress between 1990 and 2010 – Fujimori, Serrano, Chávez, and Correa – was an outsider.

Second, successful populists earn an electoral mandate to bury the political establishment. The core message of populist campaigns is that the elite and its institutions are corrupt and exclusionary, and that the existing regime is therefore not truly democratic (Hawkins 2010). Fujimori, Chávez, Morales, and Correa all claimed that their countries’ regimes were “partyarchies” (i.e., “rule by the parties” rather than by “the people”) and pledged to replace them with an “authentic” democracy. Presidential candidates who win on the basis of such appeals earn a mandate to “re-found” the political system. Thus, subsequent efforts to alter the constitutional order are likely to enjoy broad public support. From a regime standpoint, this is deeply problematic, since the “system” that populists campaign against is representative democracy, and the “corrupt” or “oligarchic” institutions that they pledge to destroy are parties, legislatures, and judiciaries. It is extremely difficult to dismantle such institutions without threatening the democratic regime.

Finally, newly elected populists generally confront hostile institutions of horizontal accountability. As personalistic outsiders, most populists lack strong parties and, as such, usually fail to translate their victories in presidential elections into legislative majorities. Thus, Fujimori and Gutiérrez had few partisan allies in Congress, and Correa did not even field legislative candidates when he first ran for president in 2006. Moreover, newly elected outsiders have typically not had any influence over past appointments to the Supreme Court, the electoral authorities, and other state agencies. After taking office, then, most populists confront legislatures, judiciaries, and
bureaucracies controlled by the very establishment elites they had promised to bury during the presidential campaign. This creates a dilemma. Populists could respond to this challenge by behaving like ordinary presidents, negotiating and sharing power with traditional parties. For populists, however, such behavior – reconciling with the traditional elite they had promised to bury – would constitute a betrayal of their mandate. As the case of Lucio Gutiérrez (discussed below) shows, abandoning a populist mandate can be politically costly. Populists thus have a strong incentive to assault existing democratic institutions: to attempt to close Congress, pack the courts, and/or rewrite the constitution.

The election of a populist president is thus likely to trigger a constitutional crisis – a showdown between an outsider with a mandate to sweep away the traditional elite and its institutions and an elite which views those institutions as its last bastion of defense. Given their anti-status quo mandate and personalistic linkage to voters, populist presidents often respond to such conflicts with plebiscitarian strategies. Frequently, they use referenda to circumvent Congress and convocate a constituent assembly aimed at “re-founding” the institutional order. Alternatively, populists may directly close Congress (in effect, carrying out a presidential coup), betting that such a move will enjoy mass support.

Although populists’ plebiscitarian strategies sometimes fail (e.g., Lucio Gutiérrez), they often succeed, for two reasons. First, public opinion generally favors the president. Because populists generally win election only in the context of broad discontent over the status quo (Doyle 2011), and because they have earned an electoral mandate to bury the traditional elite, populist assaults on institutions controlled by the old elite tend to enjoy broad public support. Chávez and Correa, for example, both enjoyed approval ratings above 70 percent when they assaulted Congress and the judiciary, and Fujimori’s public approval soared to 80 percent following his 1992 coup. Second, because populist victories generally occur in the context of inchoate or collapsing party systems, the opposition tends to be weak. Indeed, the election of an outsider often accelerates party system collapse by signaling to politicians that abandoning “traditional” parties is an effective electoral strategy (Levitsky and Cameron 2003). Thus, oppositions fragment and lose their capacity to mobilize collectively against incumbent abuse.

Where such plebiscitary strategies succeed, the result is likely to be competitive authoritarianism. Backed by referendum victories and majorities in newly elected constituent assemblies, populist presidents may liquidate Congress, purge the judiciary, appoint loyalists to head the electoral authorities and other key institutions, and impose new constitutional rules of the game. With unchecked control over the state, populists have little difficulty skewing the playing field against opponents.

The relationship between populism and competitive authoritarianism should be strongest in cases of full-blown populism. Given their more extensive experience with representative institutions, maverick populists may pose less of a threat to democracy. In the case of movement populists, greater accountability to the movement-party could prevent the concentration and abuse of executive power. However, if allied social movements are themselves composed of anti-establishment forces, grassroots linkages may do little to prevent executive attacks on existing institutions.

The populist path to competitive authoritarianism has long existed in Latin America. Argentina under Perón is a classic example. During much of the twentieth century, however, populists were often toppled by military coups before they could establish any stable form of rule (e.g., Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador; Arias in Panama). The post-Cold War environment was more favorable for competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010). International and regional support for military rule disappeared, and as a result, the frequency of coups declined precipitously (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014). In the absence of military intervention,
populist presidents remained in power long enough to establish competitive authoritarian regimes.\(^4\)

**Cases**

The following section illustrates the relationship between populism and competitive authoritarianism in the cases of Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador. It shows how three successful populists – Fujimori, Chávez, and Correa – triggered slides into competitive authoritarianism. The section compares and contrasts the Fujimori, Chávez, and Correa presidencies with three other presidencies that did not have the same deleterious consequences for democracy: Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador, a full populist who betrayed his mandate, lost his popular base, and fell from power; Rafael Caldera in Venezuela, a maverick populist who worked within existing democratic institutions; and Ollanta Humala in Peru, an unsuccessful populist in 2006 who won the presidency as a non-populist in 2011 – and governed democratically. By examining these “dogs that didn’t bark,” it becomes easier to pinpoint the causal mechanisms linking populism to competitive authoritarianism.

**Peru**

Alberto Fujimori’s presidency (1990–2000) is widely viewed as populist (Roberts 1995; Weyland 2006). Fujimori was a clear outsider. Described by *The Economist* as “the man from nowhere,”\(^5\) he was a little-known university rector who had never held public office. As a child of working-class Japanese immigrants, moreover, he was not part of Peru’s predominantly white-skinned elite. Fujimori’s appeal was highly personalistic. His party, Change 90, was nothing more than a “personal platform” (Planas 2000: 350). Indeed, Fujimori was “opposed to any kind of organization” (Degregori 2000: 62). He created and discarded four different parties between 1990 and 2000, and his movement became known simply as *fujimorismo*. Finally, Fujimori made a thoroughly anti-establishment appeal. Running for president at a time of deep economic crisis and widespread public hostility toward the political elite, he cast himself as a representative of Peru’s *cholos*, or brown-skinned poor, in opposition to the *pitucos*, or “upper-class white creoles” (Degregori and Grompone 1991: 96–97). Fujimori claimed to represent the “real Peru, *cholo Peru.*”\(^6\) His main rival, Mario Vargas Llosa, was backed by virtually the entire elite, and his party’s legislative candidate list “read like a who’s who of the Peruvian political establishment” (Cameron 1997: 43). In an election that came to be defined as a “confrontation between the white elite . . . and the nonwhite common people” (de la Torre 2000: 124), Fujimori won easily.

Fujimori’s government was, in some respects, quite inclusionary. *Fujimorismo* mobilized groups, such as evangelical Christians and the informal sector, that had been marginalized under the old party system (Daeschner 1993: 170–174; Roberts 1995: 99–100). It also brought an unprecedented number of women (Schmidt 2006) and provincial politicians into positions of power. As one *fujimorista* congressman put it:

> The members of the . . . opposition are the ones who have always held power. With Fujimori, people like me are in Congress. The opposition would never have allowed me into their ranks because I’m not like them. I’m not white. I’m not from Lima. And I don’t have money.\(^7\)

Yet the government also proved authoritarian. Fujimori took office as a minority president. Change 90 won only 32 of 180 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, leaving the bulk of
Congress in the hands of established parties of the right, center, and left (Kenney 2004). Likewise, the judiciary continued to be controlled by of judges appointed by the established parties (Kenney 2004: 196–197). Facing a hyperinflationary crisis, Fujimori reversed his programmatic course and adopted Vargas Llosa’s market-oriented program. Yet he remained thoroughly populist. Although opportunities existed to forge a legislative coalition with right-wing parties that backed his economic program (Kenney 2004: 126, 136), Fujimori lacked experience with (or interest in) negotiating such coalitions. According to a former aide, he “couldn’t stand the idea of inviting the President of the Senate to lunch in the Presidential Palace every time he wanted to pass a law.”

Fujimori thus responded to legislative and judicial opposition by launching a “systematic attack on Peru’s political elites and the establishment institutions they controlled – namely, the political parties, Congress, and the judiciary” (Roberts 1995: 97). Dismissing democratic institutions as “partyarchy,” he quickly entered into a “chicken game” with the opposition (Tanaka 1998: 212–213), circumventing Congress via executive decrees while congressional leaders moved to limit his powers and threatened to impeach him (Kenney 2004: 172–191). The result was an institutional showdown: as one government official put it, “either the Congress would kill the president, or the president would kill the Congress.”

The president prevailed, and the result was democratic breakdown. On April 5, 1992, Fujimori carried out a presidential coup, closing Congress, dissolving the constitution, and purging the judiciary. Several leading journalists and members of Congress were arrested, and ex-President Alan García was forced into exile (Cotler 1994: 209–210). Public opinion, which had increasingly backed Fujimori during his escalating conflict with Congress (Tanaka 1998: 225–226; Kenney 2004: 234–235), overwhelmingly endorsed the coup. The president’s approval rating soared from 53 to 81 percent (Carrión 2006: 129), and surveys found more than 80 percent support for the dissolution of Congress and purge of the judiciary (Conaghan 2005: 33; Kenney 2004: 228). A poll in Lima following the coup found that 51 percent of respondents characterized Fujimori’s autogolpe as “democratic,” while only 33 percent viewed it as “dictatorial” (Kenney 2004: 231).

With the “traditional” parties discredited and weakened by defection, opposition efforts to mobilize resistance failed miserably (Levitsky and Cameron 2003).

The 1992 autogolpe ushered in nearly a decade of competitive authoritarianism. The coup allowed Fujimori to “monopolize a level of power unheard of in Peru in decades” (Degregori 2003: 220). Thus, even as constituent assembly elections in late 1992, approval of a new constitution in 1993, and new presidential and legislative elections in 1995 restored the outward appearance of democracy, Fujimori and his intelligence advisor, Vladimiro Montesinos, used this power to systematically corrupt state institutions and tilt the playing field against opponents. Judicial and tax authorities became “instruments of persecution,” targeting opposition politicians, businesspeople, and independent media (Durand 2003: 459–463). Montesinos bribed and blackmailed hundreds of public officials, including four Supreme Court justices, three of five members of the National Elections Board, and dozens of legislators and judges (Conaghan 2005).

Eventually, he also placed four of his five private television networks and more than a dozen tabloid newspapers on the state’s payroll (Fowks 2000: 58–72). This presidential power grab was facilitated by widespread public support: Fujimori’s approval rating remained consistently above 60 percent, allowing him to easily win re-election – and a solid legislative majority – in 1995 (Carrión 2006: 128–129).

The regime grew more nakedly authoritarian after 1995, as Fujimori engaged in a series of abuses aimed at gaining an illegal third term. In 1996, the fujimorista-dominated Congress passed a dubiously constitutional law permitting Fujimori to run again in 2000 (Conaghan 2005: 121–122). After the Constitutional Tribunal ruled against the law, the rubber-stamp
Congress impeached three of its members, effectively disabling the institution (Conaghan 2005: 126–130). The 2000 election was unfair. The electoral authorities were packed, media coverage was biased, and millions of dollars in state funds were diverted to Fujimori’s campaign (Conaghan 2005: 132–134, 163–188). Opposition parties thus “faced a steeply tilted playing field – indeed, a virtual cliff” (McClintock 2006a: 255). Opposition candidate Alejandro Toledo boycotted the runoff, allowing Fujimori to win unopposed. The victory proved pyrrhic, however, as a leaked videotape revealing Montesinos’ corruption triggered the regime’s collapse two months later (Cameron 2006).

The Fujimori presidency may be contrasted to that of Ollanta Humala (2011–2016). Like Fujimori, Humala was an outsider – a former military officer who led a failed uprising against Fujimori in 2000. Seeking the presidency in 2006, Humala ran a radical populist campaign, promising to sweep away Peru’s political and economic elite (McClintock 2006b: 100–101). Had he won, Humala might have triggered a regime crisis. However, Humala lost a second-round runoff to ex-President Alan García, whose ability to tag Humala as a chavista cost him support in Lima and along the coast (Cameron 2011: 387). Humala learned his lesson, and when he ran again in 2011, he abandoned populism. Thus, although his platform promised “social inclusion,” Humala studiously avoided anti-establishment appeals during the 2011 campaign. Indeed, his second-round victory owed much to the support of liberal establishment figures such as ex-President Alejandro Toledo and novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (Levitsky 2011: 90). In 2011, then, Humala neither sought nor earned a popular mandate to bury the elite or “re-found” the republic. And, notwithstanding elite hysteria over a potential chavista turn, Humala governed democratically.

In sum, Alberto Fujimori’s populist ascent to power was a major catalyst behind Peru’s slide into competitive authoritarianism. Lacking experience with (or a commitment to) democratic institutions, facing hostile institutions of horizontal accountability, and armed with a popular mandate to bury the political establishment, Fujimori had both an incentive and the capacity to use plebiscitarian means to assault the existing democratic institutions and tilt the playing field in his favor. By contrast, Ollanta Humala, despite having once been an open admirer of Hugo Chávez, was elected in 2011 as a non-populist, and he opted to work within the constitutional order.

Venezuela

Hugo Chávez is “arguably the most quintessential populist figure Latin America ha[s] seen since Juan Perón” (Roberts 2012: 136). First, he was an outsider. A lieutenant colonel who rose to national prominence in 1992 when he led an unsuccessful coup attempt against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, Chávez had no ties to existing parties and could thus portray himself as “untainted by the rampant corruption, political patronage, and collusive pactmaking” (Roberts 2003: 36) that many Venezuelans believed characterized the existing political elite. Second, Chávez was personalistic. His first party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), was a “poorly institutionalized personalistic movement” (Roberts 2003: 53), and most of his supporters self-identified as chavistas (Hawkins 2003: 1150). Finally, Chávez made a virulently anti-establishment appeal. Claiming that Venezuela was a “partyarchy,” not a democracy, he pledged to sweep the established parties “from the face of the earth” and insisted that the “rotten elites of the parties” would “soon be consigned to the trashbin of history.” The appeal was successful: Chávez won the 1998 election easily, defeating Henrique Salas Römer, a wealthy, white-skinned candidate backed by Democratic Action (AD) and COPEI, Venezuela’s two established parties.
The backdrop to Chávez’s rise to power was an acute political and economic crisis. Venezuela’s oil-dependent economy had been in decline since the late 1970s. Between 1984 and 1993, the poverty rate nearly doubled (from 36 to 62 percent) (Roberts 2003: 51). As the economy declined, popular rage with the political establishment grew. In 1989, mass riots broke out in Caracas in an event known as the Caracazo, and a poll in 1992 showed that 85 percent of Venezuelans agreed that political parties “did nothing to help the country’s problems” (Romero 1997: 16). As a result, when Chávez launched his 1992 coup attempt, he and his fellow conspirators “became instant heroes for many Venezuelans” (Hawkins 2010: 17).

The first beneficiary of this anti-establishment mood was former president Rafael Caldera, whose maverick populist presidency (1994–1999) may be usefully contrasted to that of Chávez. As a founding father of Venezuela’s post-1958 democracy and a longtime COPEI leader, Caldera was a consummate political insider. However, his public display of sympathy for the 1992 coup plotters’ motives transformed him into the “principal spokesperson” (Coppedge 1994: 53) for the emerging anti-establishment opposition and paved the way for a populist-style presidential bid in 1993. Thus, Caldera abandoned COPEI, created a personalistic vehicle, and campaigned as an “anti-establishment figure” (Coppedge 1994: 53), repeatedly attacking the two dominant parties. He won narrowly. Despite his populist route to power, however, Caldera governed democratically. Although he lacked a legislative majority, Caldera “steadfastly resisted calls for a Fujimorazo” (Crisp, Levine, and Molina 2003: 278). Instead, he forged a legislative pact with AD, which allowed him to muddle through to the end of his term with democracy intact. This restraint may have been rooted, in part, in Caldera’s experience with – and perhaps commitment to – existing democratic institutions.

The Chávez government, which succeeded Caldera’s, was markedly different. Like Caldera, Chávez won the presidency on an explicitly anti-system appeal. Also like Caldera, he initially lacked a legislative majority: his allies won only 70 of 188 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 33 of 100 seats in the Senate. Yet whereas Caldera had opted to forge a legislative coalition and work within the existing institutional order, Chávez launched a plebiscitarian assault on it. Describing the opposition as a “nest of dying venomous vipers” and declaring his intention to “stab to death the moribund parties,” he immediately called a referendum on the idea of convening a constituent assembly. The referendum passed with 85 percent of the vote, and when constituent assembly elections were held in July 1999, chavista parties won an overwhelming majority of seats. The constituent assembly carried out a “constituent coup d’état” (Brewer-Carías 2010: 15): declaring itself “legally omnipotent,” it neutralized Congress, purged the judiciary, and appointed new electoral authorities (Coppedge 2003: 187–188). By the time the assembly had finished, “there was not a single national power, other than President Chávez himself, which [it] had not . . . appointed” (Coppedge 2003: 188). Chavismo used its supermajority to single-handedly write the new constitution. The constitution was overwhelmingly approved via referendum in December 1999, and in 2000, Chávez was easily re-elected, this time with a legislative majority.

Chávez’s ascent to power (and unilateral restructuring of the constitutional order) triggered a period of intense polarization, during which Chávez survived a brief coup (April 2002) and a massive general strike (December 2002–February 2003). Chávez’s public support plummeted during this period, making him vulnerable to an opposition-led recall election drive in 2003. However, the chavista-dominated electoral authorities stalled the opposition’s referendum drive for a year, giving the government time to regain public support (Hsieh, Miguel, Ortega, and Rodriguez 2011: 202). Soaring oil prices enabled it to do just that, and when the recall election was finally held in August 2004, Chávez easily won it. After the failed recall, chavismo took advantage of a weakened opposition and
skyrocketing oil prices to consolidate power. In December 2004, Chávez packed the Supreme Court, transforming it into a rubber stamp (Myers 2008: 315). (According to one study, not one of the 45,474 rulings issued by the Court between 2005 and 2015 went against the government [Corrales 2015: 44].) Moreover, the opposition’s boycott of the 2005 legislative election left Congress entirely in chavista hands, and Chávez easily won re-election in 2006.

Unchecked control of the state allowed Chávez to tilt the playing field against the opposition, transforming Venezuela into “the paradigmatic Latin American case of competitive authoritarianism” (Corrales 2015: 38). The government politicized state institutions and deployed them systematically against its critics. Following the 2004 referendum, for example, chavista legislator Luis Tascón published a list of those who had signed the recall petition, which was then used for blacklisting (Hsieh, Miguel, Ortega, and Rodríguez 2011). Leading opposition figures were arrested or forced into exile;14 journalists and pro-democracy activists were prosecuted on defamation and other charges; and a major television station (Radio Caracas Television, RCTV) and dozens of radio stations were forced off the air (Corrales 2011: 127–129). New media legislation empowered the government to arrest or impose ruinous fines on media figures that criticized it (Corrales 2015: 39–42). Eventually, it became clear that “the only way that a television station can guarantee its financial survival is by staying out of politics – that is, by self-censoring” (Corrales 2015: 42). In 2013, the owners of Globovisión, the last major independent television station, sold it to investors friendly to the government, leaving chavismo with de facto “communicational hegemony” (Corrales 2015: 40). Moreover, the government spent billions of dollars in oil revenue in a discretionary manner, rewarding supporters and punishing critics (Corrales and Penfold 2011). The result was a government that was “virtually impossible to defeat electorally,” since the “opposition can never match the level of resources deployed by the state” (Corrales and Penfold 2011: 43).

Following Chávez’s death in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, narrowly won an election marred by an uneven playing field (Corrales 2015: 43). As the Venezuelan economy deteriorated and public support for Maduro declined, the regime grew increasingly repressive (Corrales 2015). In 2014, the government responded to opposition protest with heavy repression, detaining more than 3,000 protesters and imprisoning major opposition leaders such as Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma (Corrales 2015: 44–45). When the opposition Democratic Unity Movement (MUD) overwhelmingly won the 2015 legislative elections and gained control of Congress, the government used the Supreme Court to emasculate the body by nullifying all significant legislation – leading some to argue that the adjective “competitive” no longer described Venezuelan authoritarianism.15

In sum, whereas maverick populist Rafael Caldera governed democratically between 1994 and 1999, Hugo Chávez, a full-scale populist, used his broad public support to dismantle Venezuela’s forty-year-old democratic regime via plebiscitarian means. Unchecked power – especially after 2004 – allowed chavismo to tilt the playing field against an already weakened opposition, ushering in more than a decade of competitive authoritarianism.

**Ecuador**

Ecuador is a case of successive populist governments under Lucio Gutiérrez (2003–2005) and Rafael Correa (2007–2017). Both governments triggered constitutional crises, but these crises were resolved in different ways. Gutiérrez largely abandoned his populist strategy upon assuming the presidency, which undermined his support base and limited his capacity to
make plebiscitary appeals – ultimately resulting in his fall from power. Correa maintained his populist strategy and, with the help of soaring oil process, used plebiscitary means to re-found the constitutional order and consolidate competitive authoritarianism.


Lucio Gutiérrez was unambiguously populist. A junior military officer who led a left-wing coup – in alliance with indigenous organizations – against President Jamil Mahuad in 2000,16 Gutiérrez was a political outsider. His 2002 presidential candidacy was personalistic and anti-establishment. His Patriotic Society Party (PSP) was a personalistic vehicle (Ray 2009: 17–20). Gutiérrez’s candidacy was thoroughly anti-system. His “entire discursive arsenal . . . was directed against traditional politicians and bankers” (Montúfar 2008: 274). Railing against the “corrupt oligarchy” and the “putrefaction of the [traditional] parties,” he called upon his fellow Ecuadorians to “rise up . . . against the ones who are always in power.”17 And if elected, he pledged, he would overhaul Ecuador’s constitution and replace Congress with a “technical body” (Gutiérrez Sanín 2005: 126).

In office, however, Gutiérrez did an about-face. Faced with an opposition-controlled Congress in which the PSP held a mere seven of 100 seats, he abandoned populism for a strategy of “negotiation and compromise” (Montúfar 2008: 280).

Although he had run on a left-wing platform, Gutiérrez forged a coalition with the conservative Social Christian Party (PSC) (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich 2010: 83–84). When this legislative coalition broke down in 2004, Gutiérrez attempted to revert to populism. Describing himself as a “dictocrat” (because, as he put it, “to the oligarchy I am a dictator and to the people I am a democrat”), he declared that he would “destroy the corrupt oligarchy” or “die trying.”18 Gutiérrez threatened to dissolve Congress and call a referendum for a constituent assembly (Montúfar 2008: 279, 288), and in late 2004, he illegally purged the Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, and the electoral authorities (Conaghan 2008a: 257–260). The government also harassed journalists and organized “shock troops” to confront protesters (Mejía Acosta 2008: 226–228). By 2005, the Gutiérrez government bore “resemblances to the government of Alberto Fujimori” (Ramírez Gallegos 2005: 19).

Gutiérrez’s power play failed, however. His earlier turn to the right had cost him the support of indigenous organizations and other former popular sector allies, and he no longer enjoyed broad public support. In early 2005, a wave of mass anti-government protest erupted, and in April of that year, Congress voted to remove him from office (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich 2010: 84). Gutiérrez’s failure was at least partly rooted in what Montúfar (2008) describes as the “intermittent” nature of his populism. Having campaigned on a radical anti-establishment platform, Gutiérrez won a mandate to bury the political elite. His alliance with the PSC – the party of the conservative establishment – violated that mandate, which eroded his support base. Without broad public support, Gutiérrez could not rely on plebiscitary appeals when he later reverted to populism, leaving him in a weakened position when he attacked institutions of horizontal accountability.


Rafael Correa was also a populist. An economist who briefly served as finance minister under interim President Alfredo Palacio in 2005, Correa was a “quintessential ‘outsider,’ with no previous experience in electoral politics” (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008: 271). His party, Proud and Sovereign Fatherland (PAIS), was so personalistic that it did not even
bother to field legislative candidates when Correa ran for president in 2006 (Conaghan 2008b: 48–50). Correa’s campaign was clearly anti-establishment. Correa ran “against the system itself” (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008: 271), framing the election as a “contest between good and evil: the honest citizenry . . . confronting the corrupt clase política” (de la Torre 2010: 179). Like Chávez, he called for a constituent assembly that would dissolve Congress and put an end to the “domination of the traditional parties” (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008: 271).

Correa’s ascent to the presidency triggered a constitutional crisis. Within hours of his inauguration, he called a referendum seeking a constituent assembly empowered to dissolve Congress and rewrite the constitution (Conaghan 2008b: 51). When Congress rejected the move, an “interinstitutional war” ensued (Mejía Acosta 2008: 222). Because the new president enjoyed widespread public support (surveys showed 70 percent support for his agenda), he was well positioned to win (Conaghan 2008b: 51–52). Thus, in March 2007, the pro-Correa electoral authorities stripped 57 of 100 legislators of their seats (Conaghan 2008b: 52), which amounted to a “civilian president’s coup” (Domínguez 2008: 340). Opposition legislators were attacked by government-sponsored mobs, and when the Constitutional Tribunal ordered the deposed legislators’ reinstatement, the rump Congress sacked a majority of the justices (Conaghan 2008b: 52). The referendum passed overwhelmingly, and PAIS won 70 percent of the vote in the 2007 constituent assembly election. The new assembly placed Congress “in recess” and allowed Correa to single-handedly rewrite the constitution (Conaghan 2008b: 57). The constitution was overwhelmingly approved via referendum in 2008, and the following year, Correa was easily re-elected, this time with a legislative majority.

Correa’s unilateral “re-foundation” of the constitutional order ushered in a competitive authoritarian regime. Now in control of all branches of government, Correa politicized state institutions and used them to attack and weaken opponents. The government harassed journalists and used anti-terrorism laws to prosecute indigenous and other civil society leaders.19 It also used libel and defamation laws to punish independent media and government critics.20 Legislation passed in 2013 expanded the government’s power to regulate and punish critical media.21 Finally, incumbent abuse of state institutions skewed access to media and resources (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008: 277). In 2013, Correa was easily re-elected, with 57 percent of the vote, and PAIS won 100 of 137 seats in the legislature. Although the election was technically clean, restrictions on campaigning, media access, and campaign finance – at the same time that PAIS made widespread use of the state – tilted the playing field in favor of the incumbents (Conaghan 2016).22

In sum, whereas Gutiérrez’s alliance with conservatives – widely seen as a betrayal of his anti-establishment mandate – undermined his populist coalition and fatally weakened his presidency, Correa successfully used plebiscitary means to dismantle pre-existing regime institutions. Other factors, including the commodities boom and the weakening of indigenous and other opposition organizations, facilitated Correa’s consolidation of power. But as in Venezuela, successful populism was arguably the primary catalyst behind the slide into competitive authoritarianism.

Comparative cases

How does our theory work among a broader set of cases? Levitsky and Loxton (2013) examined the fate of all fourteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela between 1990 and 2010. If we add the now-completed Humala presidency in Peru, we have fifteen cases. Of these, four were full-scale populists (Chávez, Correa, Fujimori, and Gutiérrez); two were maverick populists (Abdalá Bucaram and Rafael Caldera); one was a movement populist

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(Morales); and eight were non-populists. These are listed in Table 22.1. As the table shows, all four cases of full-scale populism were marked by a slide into competitive authoritarianism (albeit an abortive one in the case of Gutiérrez), as was the case of movement populism (Bolivia under Morales). Interestingly, the two cases of maverick populism did not result in competitive authoritarianism (although Bucaram was removed in a dubiously constitutional manner), an outcome that suggests the importance of political outsider status. Finally, none of the eight non-populist governments slid into competitive authoritarianism. Although some of these governments were undemocratic in other ways (for example, Hugo Banzer and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada engaged in significant repression), none of them skewed the playing field against opponents (Levitsky and Loxton 2013).

Alternative theoretical approaches do less well in explaining these outcomes. For example, economic crisis may have contributed to competitive authoritarianism in Peru and Venezuela, but it cannot explain competitive authoritarian outcomes in Bolivia and Ecuador, where economies were growing. Moreover, Presidents Sixto Durán Ballén, Jamil Mahuad, and Rafael Caldera governed democratically despite severe economic crises. Likewise, massive mineral rents may help explain competitive authoritarianism in Bolivia and Ecuador (Mazzuca 2013), but in Peru, competitive authoritarianism emerged prior to the commodities boom, while governments elected during the boom remained democratic. Likewise, Venezuela’s authoritarian turn began in 1999 – before the oil boom. Thus, although oil rents may have helped Chávez consolidate power, it was mass support, not oil revenue, that allowed him to dismantle representative democracy.

Some scholars have argued that although regimes in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela may have suffered a decline on the dimension of liberal democracy, they made gains on other, more participatory dimensions of democracy. Rather than characterize such regimes as competitive authoritarian, they argue, it may be more appropriate to view them as trading off one dimension of democracy for another.

To evaluate these claims, we examined data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project, which uses expert surveys to score cases on multiple dimensions of democracy, including liberal, deliberative, participatory, and egalitarian democracy, as well as other dimensions that capture inclusion, such as civil society participation, societal engagement, access to justice, women’s empowerment, and equal distribution of resources. To what extent do populist governments show improvement along these alternative dimensions?

The answer, at least according to V-DEM, is not much. Table 22.2 examines the change in V-DEM scores on a variety of dimensions over the course of four populist presidencies: Fujimori, Chávez, Correa, and Morales. Small-to-medium changes (5–30%) are marked by a simple (+) and (−), while large-scale changes (more than 30%) are marked by (++) and (−−). Insignificant changes (± 5% or less) are marked with a 0. As Table 22.2 shows, all populist cases declined modestly (Bolivia and Ecuador) or substantially (Peru and Venezuela) on the dimension of liberal democracy. More surprising, perhaps, is that with the sole exception of women’s empowerment in Bolivia and equal distribution of resources in Bolivia and Ecuador, none of the populist cases exhibited improvement on any alternative dimensions of democracy. Indeed, on the dimensions of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and societal engagement, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela all suffered declines. There are, of course, limitations to indexes based on expert surveys, including possible biases among experts. Nevertheless, the V-DEM data suggests that the idea of a trade-off between the liberal and participatory or egalitarian dimensions of democracy may be overstated. At least in the cases of Fujimori’s Peru, Morales’ Bolivia, Correa’s Ecuador, and chavista Venezuela, there is little evidence that movement toward competitive authoritarianism was compensated by gains on other dimensions of democracy.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that populism was the primary catalyst for the emergence of competitive authoritarianism in post-Cold War Latin America. As the case studies of Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador show, populist presidents have both incentives and a distinctive capacity to assault institutions of horizontal accountability; when they succeed, the result is almost always competitive authoritarianism.

How durable are competitive authoritarian regimes in the Andes? According to Levitsky and Way (2010), competitive authoritarian durability is rooted in the strength of state and ruling party structures. If they are correct, then Andean regimes are unlikely to consolidate. State institutions in Bolivia and Ecuador are notoriously weak, and they have weakened considerably in chavista Venezuela. And with the partial exception of Bolivia, ruling parties were also weak in all three cases. Where state and party institutions are weak, regimes tend to be unstable. Indeed, competitive authoritarianism lasted only eight years under Fujimori and broke down almost immediately under Gutiérrez. In large part because of the post-2002 commodities boom, contemporary regimes in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, as of this writing, have survived for more than a decade (Mazzuca 2013). However, their institutional bases have not solidified. Paradoxically, then, the very conditions that contributed to the rise of populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes – namely, state and party weakness – may ultimately prove to be those regimes’ undoing.

Table 22.1 Elected presidents and regime outcomes in four Andean countries, 1990–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Populism?</th>
<th>Regime outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peru</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Competitive authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan García (2006–2011)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ollanta Humala (2011–2016)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ecuador</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Correa (2007–2017)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Competitive authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bolivia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugo Banzer (1997–2001)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Democratic (illiberal) overthrown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evo Morales (2006)</td>
<td>Movement populist</td>
<td>Competitive authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Venezuela</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Caldera (1994–1999)</td>
<td>Maverick populist</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugo Chávez (1999–2013), Nicolás Maduro (2013–)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Competitive authoritarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Modified from Levitsky and Loxton (2013).
## Notes

2. Barr (2009) uses the term “plebiscitarian linkage,” but because plebiscitarianism is often understood as a strategy of governing rather than a type of political appeal, we use the term “personalism.”
4. The exception is Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, who was overthrown in a military coup in 2009.
13. Chavismo’s supermajority in the constituent assembly was in part due to a tailor-made majoritarian electoral formula that exaggerated the strength of its majority (Corrales and Penfold 2011: 18–19).
14. Former governor Manuel Rosales, Chávez’s main rival in the 2006 election, was forced into exile in 2009. Former COPEI presidential candidate Osvaldo Álvarez Paz was arrested in 2010.
16. The coup was quickly reversed (although Mahuad was removed in favor of his vice president) and Gutiérrez was imprisoned. He was pardoned a few months later.

### Table 22.2 The impact of populism: change in V-dem scores on different dimensions of democracy under four populist governments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal democracy index</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative democracy index</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory democracy index</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian democracy index</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to justice</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged society</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to political parties</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society participation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s empowerment</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal distribution of resources</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- 0 No change (increase or decline of less than 5%)
- + Moderate improvement (increase of 5–30%)
- - Moderate decline (decline of 5–30)
- ++ Substantial improvement (increase of 30% or more)
- -- Substantial decline (decline of 30% or more)

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#### Table 22.2 Notes

- Barr (2009) uses the term “plebiscitarian linkage,” but because plebiscitarianism is often understood as a strategy of governing rather than a type of political appeal, we use the term “personalism.”
- Collier and Levitsky (1997).
- The exception is Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, who was overthrown in a military coup in 2009.
- Quoted in Cameron (1997: 56).
- Quoted in López Maya (2005: 222).
- Chavismo’s supermajority in the constituent assembly was in part due to a tailor-made majoritarian electoral formula that exaggerated the strength of its majority (Corrales and Penfold 2011: 18–19).
- Former governor Manuel Rosales, Chávez’s main rival in the 2006 election, was forced into exile in 2009. Former COPEI presidential candidate Osvaldo Álvarez Paz was arrested in 2010.
- The coup was quickly reversed (although Mahuad was removed in favor of his vice president) and Gutiérrez was imprisoned. He was pardoned a few months later.
- Quoted in Montúfar (2008: 272, 277) and Madrid (2012: 97).
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23 See, for example, Cameron (2014).

References


