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Latin America's Authoritarian Drift

THE THREAT FROM THE POPULIST LEFT

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Around the turn of the millennium, prominent Latin America specialist Scott Mainwaring highlighted the surprising endurance of democracy in that region after the transition wave of the late 1970s and 1980s.¹ During that interval, no democracy had permanently succumbed to a military coup or slid back into authoritarian rule. After decades marked by instability in numerous countries, especially Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, this newfound democratic resilience came as a welcome surprise.

But at about the time Mainwaring was writing, onetime coupmaker Hugo Chávez was winning election to the Venezuelan presidency and beginning to move his country away from democratic rule. Venezuela had survived the rash of military coups that swept the region in the 1960s and 1970s to become a byword for democratic stability in Latin America. Economic deterioration, political ossification, and rampant corruption had brought sustained decay, however, and paved the way for this radical populist, former army officer, and would-be *golpista* (he had led a violent putsch that failed in February 1992) to decisively win the free and fair December 1998 balloting. Using plebiscitarian strategies to transform the country's liberal institutional framework, concentrate power, and entrench himself, Chávez set about strangling democracy and putting competitive authoritarianism in its place.² He remained as president till he died of cancer on 5 March 2013.

The Chávez phenomenon has had strong demonstration and contagion effects beyond Venezuela. Eager to overcome instability and cement their own supremacy, Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia (2006–)

and Rafael Correa of Ecuador (2007–) have emulated Chávez's script. As did their political ally and financial benefactor, they have used constituent assemblies to augment executive powers, allow for presidential reelection, and weaken institutional checks and balances. From that position of strength, they have made discretionary use of the law for political purposes. With this discriminatory legalism, they have attacked, undermined, and intimidated the opposition in their respective countries, moving toward competitive authoritarianism as well.

Similarly, strong informal pressures and disrespect for constitutional principles have enabled Daniel Ortega (2007–) to establish his hegemony in Nicaragua. President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras (2006–2009) also sought to follow in the footsteps of Chávez, Morales, and Correa by convoking a constituent assembly and preparing his own perpetuation in power; yet coordinated opposition from Congress, the courts, and the military aborted this effort through a controversial June 2009 coup. Even President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina (2007–), whose fervent supporters take inspiration from Chávez, is eyeing constitutional changes and renewed reelection (she is now in her second term). Given Argentina's weak and disunited opposition, this push for entrenchment, combined with continuing attacks on the press and the president's personalistic command over the state, has created alarm in civil society about looming threats to the country's hard-won democracy.

That Venezuela had already fallen under nondemocratic rule was confirmed in October 2012 by Chávez's unfair reelection, achieved with the help of intimidation tactics, tight restrictions on the opposition, and the massive misuse of the state apparatus. Since the third wave reached Latin America in 1978, the region had seen only occasional threats and temporary interruptions of democracy in individual nations. The recent suffocation of political pluralism in a whole group of countries is without precedent. For the first time in decades, democracy in Latin America is facing a sustained, coordinated threat. The regional trend toward democracy, which had prevailed since the late 1970s, has suffered a partial reversal. Unexpectedly, democracy is now on the defensive in parts of the region.³

With its electoral façade and progressive rhetoric about helping the excluded, the soft authoritarianism that is taking hold in parts of Latin America has an attractive face. It exerts an appeal on regional and global public opinion to which academics are not immune. The military dictators of the 1960s and 1970s were ogres with no legitimacy who depicted themselves as stopgaps—house cleaners putting politics in order so democracy could return. By contrast, Chávez and friends have claimed to institute a new participatory—and hence qualitatively better—form of democracy and to promote social equity and national independence. Rather than a short-lived detour, they seek to carve out a distinct development path purportedly leading to what Chávez called “socialism for

the twenty-first century.” Their competitive authoritarianism appears not as a limited interruption but a permanent alternative to pluralist, representative democracy. This appeal is unusual among contemporary nondemocracies; it contrasts with Russian strongman Vladimir Putin’s more bluntly unsavory brand of autocracy, for instance. These “progressive” claims aggravate the risks emanating from the recent turn to authoritarian rule.

The current authoritarian trend in Latin America is not regionwide: Major countries such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and now Colombia seem safely consolidated as democracies; Costa Rica and Uruguay boast especially high democratic performance. But the unexpected ease with which a coordinated nucleus of competitive authoritarianism has emerged must give pause. To see even Argentina, with its tragic history, being lured by the siren song of personalistic plebiscitarianism is worrisome indeed.

Establishing Political Hegemony

As Steven Levitsky and James Loxton and Raúl Madrid have emphasized, Chávez and his friends used populism to entrench their predominance and install competitive authoritarian regimes.⁴ Populism, understood as a strategy for winning and exerting state power,⁵ inherently stands in tension with democracy and the value that it places upon pluralism, open debate, and fair competition. Populism revolves around personalistic leadership that feeds on quasi-direct links to a loosely organized mass of heterogenous followers. Bypassing or subjugating intermediate institutions such as firmly organized parties, the leader—often a charismatic figure—establishes face-to-face contact with large numbers of citizens. In earlier decades, mass rallies were crucial; nowadays, television allows populists to reach their followers “in person.” Chávez hosted a regular Sunday talk show. The leader in turn ascertains “the people’s will” through frequent popular votes and opinion polls. To show vigorous leadership, seem indispensable, and boost followers’ loyalty, populist politicians are fond of constantly attacking enemies, at least rhetorically. In this way, the leader blames others for the problems that have allowed the leader to take power and act as the savior of the fatherland. The leader is the star of a drama in which “the people” struggle heroically under the leader’s direction against selfish, corrupt enemies at home and abroad.

As a political strategy, populism can have variegated and shifting ideological orientations and pursue diverse economic and social policies. Contemporary Latin America has seen populist presidents from the right, such as Argentina’s Carlos Saúl Menem (1989–99) and Peru’s Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000), and populists of the left such as Chávez, Morales, and Correa. Many populist leaders have embraced economic nationalism and state interventionism, yet others have imposed free-

market reforms. In a particular twist, the Peronist Menem dismantled the protectionism-based developmental model that his own party's populist founder, Juan Perón (president from 1946 to 1955, and then again from 1973 to 1974), had installed.

Populism will always stand in tension with democracy. The logic of personalism drives populist politicians to widen their powers and discretion. Because these leaders sustain their influence via personal appeals rather than intermediary organizations, they see any institutions outside their control as obstacles to be bypassed or overcome. Determined and politically compelled to boost their personal predominance, populist leaders strive to weaken constitutional checks and balances and to subordinate independent agencies to their will. They undermine institutional protections against the abuse of power and seek political hegemony.

Correspondingly, populist leaders treat opponents not as adversaries in a fair and equal competition, but as profound threats. Branding rivals "enemies of the people," they seek all means to defeat and marginalize them. Turning politics into a struggle of "us against them," populists undermine pluralism and bend or trample institutional safeguards. Populist leaders also put strong pressure on independent forces in civil society and strive to control the media, especially television. All these attacks, depicted as a defense of the people against rapacious elites, are also meant to strengthen leader-follower bonds and thus to compensate for the lack of organizational mediation. The absence of institutional discipline in the populist movement prompts the leader to recharge the base's loyalty through heroic activism. In all these ways, the populist notion of politics as an "all or nothing" struggle damages democracy.

Populism, whether of the left or the right, is a threat to democracy. Yet in Latin America today, the graver and more sustained danger is coming from the leftist variant. Chávez set the model. As soon as he was elected president of Venezuela, he set about revamping the country's institutional framework. First, he called a constituent assembly. Then, to dislodge the established political class that he charged with selfishness and corruption, he successfully pushed to close the recently elected bicameral Congress, where his followers held only about a third of the seats. Thanks to a reengineered electoral system, Chávez dominated the constituent assembly that boosted his powers, ended the ban on consecutive terms, and created a new unicameral (and hence easier to control) national legislature. These institutional victories—plus the promise of socioeconomic change—lifted Chávez and his camp to victory in the 2000 elections. Moreover, he took control of the courts and other independent institutions, such as Venezuela's electoral commission, and soon had a stranglehold on all branches of government.⁶

Chávez and his supporters, along with some academics and intellectuals, claimed that Venezuela had become a participatory democracy. Common citizens, so long neglected by traditional politicians, could

at last have a direct say in their own governance. There is some truth to these claims when it comes to local decision making and social-program implementation, but they are unconvincing as applied to the crucial arena of national policy making.

There should be no mistaking that Hugo Chávez made every important decision and thoroughly determined his country's political course. No aide could rein him in, and the people lacked the capacity to advance their collective will independently. The absence of firm popular organization and of transparent decision-making procedures precluded effective bottom-up influence. Political initiative emanated from the leader, not the citizens. Chávez never changed any significant plan due to popular resistance. Even when he lost, as in the 2007 constitutional plebiscite, he simply redoubled his efforts and pushed through to his goals. Rather than driving decisions, the populace was the object of Chávez's populist strategies and tactics, as can be seen from the rapid rise and decline of *chavista* movements such as the Bolivarian Circles. Talk about direct democracy cannot change contemporary Venezuela's status as a prototypical case of personalistic populism. Chávez's handpicked successor Nicolás Maduro, who won an April 2013 special election to the presidency, is perpetuating this top-down style—witness the strikingly opaque machinations that surrounded Maduro's assumption of presidential powers during the later stages of Chávez's illness.

Chávez's success in revamping Venezuelan politics and fortifying his personal dominance turned his strategy of constitutional reform into a script that other populist-leaning left-wing leaders followed. The core of the Chávez method is to use plebiscitarian mass support in order to transform established institutions, dismantle checks and balances, concentrate power in the hands of the president, and promote immediate reelection. Like their Venezuelan role model and generous patron, Evo Morales in Bolivia,⁷ Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (till he was stopped) called for constituent assemblies with the aim of boosting the presidency's powers and paving the way toward indefinite reelection to that office. Bolivia and Ecuador's respective histories of acute instability—including interrupted presidencies—and consequent hopes for “a fresh start” guaranteed strong popular support for the new chief executives. With this majoritarian backing, personalistic leaders undermined liberal, pluralist institutions.

In Bolivia, the Morales government shut the opposition out of decisive stages of the constitution-drafting process.⁸ The charismatic leader then won his foes' agreement to a referendum on the tailor-made charter by promising not to run in 2014. But he soon went back on this vow; a typical populist, he is determined to cling to power. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa got his constituent-assembly election by engineering the irregular removal of more than half the members of Congress. By in-

voking popular sovereignty, this populist leader managed to defeat his adversaries and rewrite the rules via a new charter that greatly increased presidential powers.

The Weapon of Discriminatory Legalism

Once these populists of the left established predominance, they used their unfettered control over all branches of government to limit debate, strike at opponents, and drastically tilt the electoral playing field. These maneuvers dismantled democratic accountability and eliminated safeguards against arbitrariness. Hegemonic presidents called frequent referenda to garner plebiscitarian acclaim, but always with arrangements in place to ensure that these ballot-box exercises never gave the opposition a fair chance to win. When adversaries did manage to claim a victory, as happened occasionally from 2007 to 2010 in Venezuela, Chávez employed all kinds of shenanigans to render it meaningless. In late 2010, for instance, he crippled a newly elected parliament with significant opposition representation by having the outgoing assembly, where his supporters had exclusive control, delegate extensive legislative powers to him.

In these ways, left-wing populists have slowly but surely smothered democracy and entrenched competitive authoritarian rule in several Latin American states. Their brand of soft authoritarianism violates basic principles of democracy by placing controls on the media and the opposition while the government electioneers using state resources. Even when presidents command high popularity, as left-wing populists often have, contests held under such profoundly unfair conditions cannot qualify as democratic. Where the parameters of political choice are so badly distorted, majority support cannot compensate for serious infringements of pluralism and competitiveness.

While justifying their undemocratic moves with progressive claims, left populists have eagerly availed themselves of timeworn tactics of Latin American politics. Presidents in the region have long been known for efforts to distort electoral competition and unfairly perpetuate themselves in power. In particular, they have applied discriminatory legalism and its maxim “For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law!” As populist chief executives have commandeered all major institutions including the courts, they have used formally legal authority in discretionary ways to promote their cronies and allies while punishing or intimidating critics and opponents in politics and society. With the government controlling all avenues of appeal and avoiding blatant violations of formal rules, those targeted find few chances for domestic recourse or the gathering of international support.

Here again, Chávez proved himself a trendsetter: He showed how skillfully an elected incumbent can employ discriminatory legalism to stifle debate and push critics and opponents to the wall. With comprehensive

control over Venezuela's political institutions, Chávez closed a number of independent television stations and threatened the remaining ones; used trumped-up charges to jail or drive into exile recalcitrant judges and opposition leaders; and exploited oil rents and the state apparatus for campaigning. In these ways, he sapped the opposition's chances of success and ensured himself frequent victories at the polls. If his adversaries did win against all odds, he used various ploys to limit the effects. After the opposition managed to win the mayoralty of Caracas in 2008, for instance, Chávez folded much of the city into a new Capital District under a handpicked commissioner who was given most of the power and funding that had previously been under the mayor's control. With such unfair tactics, this populist leader undermined democracy and skewed political competition.

Seeing how discriminatory legalism has served to entrench competitive authoritarian rule in Venezuela, the leftist presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua have followed suit and imitated Chávez. In Latin America today, the strangling of pluralism and competitiveness is not confined to a single case. Instead, formally legal means to control the media, attack the opposition, and massively use the state for electioneering are catching on in a whole set of countries as handy expedients for incumbents intent upon securing a lock on power.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism have used trumped-up charges of administrative irregularities, corruption, terrorism, and genocide against numerous opposition politicians, imprisoning some, driving many others out of the country, and intimidating the rest. The competitiveness that is essential to democracy cannot survive in such a hostile setting. Ecuador's Rafael Correa has applied similar tactics, for example against the politician who challenged him in the 2006 election. Correa also seized on a 2010 police rebellion—painted by him as a coup attempt—as a pretext for cracking down on independent social and political forces. And he has intimidated the media by suing for exorbitant damages and stiff prison sentences over an opinion piece. Daniel Ortega has decreed many paralegal measures in Nicaragua's weakly institutionalized polity and has put persistent pressure on independent NGOs. After extracting concessions from an opposition leader who had been convicted of corruption charges, Ortega packed the courts and then had his appointees on the bench exempt him from the constitution's ban on immediate reelection. Furthermore, Ortega's supporters relied on manipulation and fraud in the 2008 municipal elections. In Nicaragua, discriminatory legalism has shaded into systematic illegalism.

Even in Argentina, where democracy has so far survived populist pressures, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (often known as CFK) has started to follow a Chávez-like script. Businesspeople who publicly criticize her have found themselves targets of special tax audits. Media outlets that draw her ire—the newspaper *Clarín* is a particu-

lar thorn in her side—have faced everything from antitrust investigations to mob violence. Even as it has been bullying critics, the ruling group around Kirchner has been floating the idea of calling a constituent assembly to pave the way for a third CFK term. Argentine civil society, however, has pushed back harder against this scheme than civil society in a “Bolivarian” country would likely be able to do. Mass protests in late 2012 noisily opposed the extension of CFK’s rule, suggesting that Argentina will not easily be led down the Chávez path.

Populism Left and Right

The populist wing of Latin America’s contemporary left poses a significantly stronger challenge to democracy than did the wave of right-wing populist presidents who rose to prominence in the 1990s (or in Colombia’s case, the 2000s). Carlos Menem and Alberto Fujimori, along with Brazil’s Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–92) and Colombia’s Alvaro Uribe (2002–10), also employed populist strategies, but on behalf of neoliberal economic policies and, in Peru and Colombia, the need to defeat violent leftist guerrillas. Despite differing from the current crop of left-wing populists on ideology and policy, these rightist presidents nonetheless favored a similar personalistic leadership style and mobilized amorphous, heterogeneous mass followings in a quasi-direct fashion. Each president cast himself as the people’s champion in a struggle against malign forces such as established politicians and left-wing insurgents. In these ways, neoliberal populists garnered wide popular support that they sought to sustain with plebiscitarian tactics.

In typical populist fashion, these neoliberal politicians sought to boost presidential powers, weaken checks and balances, and extend their control over the government while preparing their own reelections. Menem, for instance, bent constitutional rules by issuing an unprecedented number of “emergency” decrees and packed Argentina’s Supreme Court in order to protect his arrogations of power. Collor steamrolled Brazil’s Congress, forcing legislators to accept drastic macroeconomic-stabilization measures by using his decree powers to confront the lawmakers with a *fait accompli*. Menem and Uribe pushed constitutional changes designed to help them get reelected. Most blatantly, Fujimori closed Congress and took control of the courts with his 1992 *autogolpe* (self-coup). Faced with strong international protests, he sought to tack away from naked authoritarianism by calling a constituent assembly that augmented presidential prerogatives and allowed for his reelection. The new charter also weakened the legislative branch by replacing Peru’s bicameral Congress with a unicameral assembly. In these ways, right-wing populists damaged Latin American democracy, destroying it altogether for a time in Peru.

But this deterioration was limited in severity in Argentina, Brazil, and

Colombia, and in duration in Peru. Collor did not keep his promise to “kill inflation” and was defeated by Brazil’s political class, which forced him to resign amid a corruption scandal. Menem and Uribe did achieve policy success and parlayed the resulting popularity into convincing reelection victories. But the desire of each to win a third consecutive term ran afoul of intraparty opposition in Argentina and a powerful independent Constitutional Court in Colombia. When Menem and Uribe stepped down, democracy in Argentina and Colombia recovered. Even Fujimori, who in 2000 managed to win a second reelection, fell soon thereafter as his ever more extreme personalism collapsed under its self-destructive logic. Once the president had pulverized the party system and subjugated the Peruvian state, his rule was thoroughly extra-institutional, resting on shady personal connections sustained by widespread corruption. When evidence of this crass bribery surfaced, Fujimori’s hold on power vanished. The political demise of Fujimori—who is now serving jail time for corruption and human-rights abuses—brought back full democracy, with ample public debate and free and fair elections. Thus, right-wing populism did not ruin democracy in Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia, and in Peru democracy’s destruction and temporary replacement were followed by a quick resurrection.

By contrast, left-wing populism has a more negative balance sheet. Chávez dominated Venezuelan politics for fourteen years, stopped only by his death. His underlings have good chances of retaining control, aided by the emotional impact of Chávez’s “martyrdom.” Morales, Correa, and Ortega have also cemented their respective hegemonies and prepared their own continuations in power. Bolivia’s president, as mentioned, has gone back on his promise not to run again in 2014. With Correa’s February 2013 reelection to a third term now behind him, he is poised to tighten his own political stranglehold. Given these leaders’ unfettered control over state resources and their willingness to employ discriminatory legalism, opposition forces face steep uphill battles in a context of heavily rigged electoral competition. Incumbent governments have jailed opposition politicians or driven them out of the country in Bolivia, and have attacked and intimidated civil society in Ecuador and Nicaragua. These tightening constraints on political pluralism give the nondemocratic leaders of left-wing populism ever firmer foundations for their rule.

The Levers of the Left

Why has left-wing populism been doing more damage to democracy in Latin America than right-wing populism did? This asymmetry reflects differences not in intention, but in capacity. Today’s populists of the left command greater political strength and have more policy tools. They can push further down the road toward concentrated power than could their neoliberal cousins of a few years ago.

First, right-wing populism has a temporary (usually crisis-driven) support base, while leftist populism has more lasting roots, particularly in the “informal” sectors that figure so largely in the economies of many Latin American countries. Second, by reducing the power of the state over markets and private economic actors, neoliberalism diminishes the power of right-wing leaders. The growing state interventionism favored by left-wing populists, by contrast, gives them additional means of influence. Third, neoliberalism exposes right-wing populists to international pressures for democracy; economic nationalism, by contrast, insulates leftist presidents from such exhortations. Finally, right-wing populists acted separately, while today’s left-wing leaders form a coordinated group. This cohesion further disarms international pressures to maintain democracy. For all these reasons, Bolivarian leaders have managed to strangle democracy much more effectively than neoliberal populists ever could.

The populists of the right always stood on shakier political ground than that of Chávez and his friends. Neoliberal populists won office by vowing to solve crises. Success made these leaders dispensable. By contrast, left-wing populists invoke structural problems—poverty, inequality, marginalization—that allow only for slow progress and resist definitive resolution. Stubborn problems thus justify one reelection of “the leader” after another. Moreover, these presidents have relied not only on performance-based legitimacy, but also on durable identity-based appeals that cast them as champions of, for example, informal workers, barrio residents, or indigenous people.

The right-wing populist presidents Menem, Fujimori, and Collor rose to power amid bouts of hyperinflation. These economic catastrophes discredited the existing parties in Argentina, Peru, and Brazil, respectively, opening space in each country for an outsider who pledged to stop the pain. But the political weakness that followed Collor’s failure to end inflation contributed to his downfall on corruption charges. Menem and Fujimori eventually brought skyrocketing prices under control and received massive popular support in return. But the backing did not endure: Once these presidents had restored economic stability, voters switched to worrying about poverty and unemployment—problems that executives committed to neoliberal austerity, budget discipline, and privatization found much harder to solve. Within Menem’s own Peronist party, for instance, a rival running to Menem’s left cut him off from his hopes for a third term.

Fujimori and Uribe also won popular support with their success in fighting guerrillas. An improving security situation boosted each president’s popularity for a while. But as the danger receded, especially in Peru, citizens’ priorities shifted, exposing the two chief executives to a paradox of success. Their very accomplishments hamstrung their efforts to perpetuate themselves in office. Fujimori fell in 2000, the victim of his achievements as well as his considerable excesses, and Uribe failed to parlay his 2008 victories over leftist insurgents into another reelection in 2010.

Left-wing populists, by contrast, base their appeal on structural problems. They highlight Latin America's longstanding social deficits, especially widespread poverty and inequality. While the established political

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class looks self-serving and beholden to privileged elites, left-wing populists project concern for common citizens and start generous social programs that—despite frequent administrative problems stemming from politicization—significantly increase benefits, alleviate destitution, and bring symbolic recognition as well. This deliberate identification with ordinary people and their plight is reinforced by the leaders' affiliations with the popular

sectors from which they spring (or with which they identify themselves). Left-populist identity politics is especially important in Bolivia, where the supporters of Morales like to boast that he is the first indigenous president that this majority-indigenous country has ever had. Similarly, Chávez dwelt often on his humble upbringing and spoke in a popular (and vulgar) idiom not previously associated with presidents of Venezuela.

Left-wing populists claim to be the first chief executives to embrace a preferential option for the poor. Their social programs embody this commitment, but cannot quickly overcome longstanding structural deficits. This slow progress with no end in sight yields more durable political payoffs than neoliberal populists' success in solving dramatic crises. Left-wing populists prove their social orientation and performance, and then point to the difficulty of the task in order to explain why they must stay in office. Thus, activist social policies further cement identity-based loyalties. These bonds give left-wing populism more reliable political sustenance than neoliberal leaders can command and allow left-wing populists to do graver damage to democracy.

The neoliberal economics to which recent right-wing populists were devoted, far from fortifying their political hegemony, ended up diminishing their control over economic matters and hence weakening them politically. Certainly, in the short run market-based reforms can augment presidential influence. Privatization programs, in which the government decides who may buy public enterprises, offer obvious opportunities for extracting favors. But once firms pass into private hands, the government loses control. Thus neoliberalism's end product is reduced presidential clout.

Neoliberal orthodoxy limits leaders in other ways. Budget discipline restrains patronage spending. Personnel cuts shrink the leeway for hiring cronies. Reliance on market forces precludes large-scale employment programs. Moreover, business and international financial institutions insist on firm, transparent legal parameters and thus reduce

leaders' autonomy and discretion. In sum, neoliberalism constrains populist chief executives and hinders their continued reelections.

By contrast, left-leaning populists boost state interventionism. They add to the public payroll, increase regulation, and nationalize enterprises. This yields growing patronage resources, so presidents can buy support and press their opponents. As ever more people come to depend on the state, they become possible targets for discriminatory legalism. Citizens have an incentive to toe the line and back the incumbent, however grudgingly, as in the 2012 election that returned a dying Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela. Businesspeople need to think twice before funding oppositionists lest the government find a pretext to revoke business licenses, deny access to foreign exchange, or impose other sanctions. Once a populist president has established hegemony and defanged accountability mechanisms, extensive state interventionism offers untold new chances to reward friends, punish foes, and tilt the playing field.

In the years since the Cold War's end, international pressures in favor of democracy have come to the fore. Neoliberal economic-policy commitments exposed right-wing populists to these in ways that left-wing populists have seldom if ever experienced. After Fujimori's self-coup, he quickly backed away from open authoritarianism lest economic sanctions foil his market reforms. To preserve his hard-won economic success, Fujimori called elections for a constituent assembly and restored room for political competition. Neoliberalism trumped authoritarianism. Similar external pressures later limited Fujimori's efforts to manipulate the 2000 presidential election; they also hindered Menem's and Uribe's attempts to stay in office.

Left-wing populists, by contrast, can huddle behind economic nationalism. Reduced reliance on global market forces and rising statism build walls against international efforts to promote democracy. Under fire for blatant uses of discriminatory legalism, Chávez pulled out of hemispheric institutions such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. He also kept international election observers out of Venezuela, which helped him to hide how badly he had warped the competitive arena in his own favor. With the continuing boom in oil and natural-gas prices, commodity-rich Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have been able to ignore global market pressures (as has Nicaragua, which receives Venezuelan subsidies).

Yesterday's right-wing populists differed from today's left-wing populists, finally, in being less organized as a group. Neoliberal presidents may have banded together to found the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) but they never did much to support one another diplomatically. For instance, neither Menem nor Collor backed Fujimori after his self-coup, and neither ever came close to trying to shutter Congress. When Chávez put democracy to death by constituent assemblies, he inspired imitators. Fujimori's more direct attack on democracy had no such effect on his neoliberal peers.

Left-wing populists act in coordinated ways. Morales, Correa, and Zelaya (who was stopped early in the process) sought to retrace Chávez's path through constitutional change to political hegemony and discriminatory legalism. Daniel Ortega took advantage of Nicaragua's low level of institutionalization to push his changes through by informal means. They all benefited from Chávez's petrodollars, political advice, diplomatic support, and security protection. This comprehensive backing from Caracas strengthened left-wing populists both at home and abroad. Thus did Chávez help to smother democracy in several countries.

The tendency of left-wing populists to close ranks also serves to protect their assaults on political competition from international rescue efforts. The hemispheric community can force the president of Peru to retreat from open authoritarianism, but has no such leverage on a cohesive group of countries that aid one another and wield something akin to a veto within regional institutions. Among their tacit allies have been more moderate countries, such as Brazil, which see Bolivarian radicalism as a handy foil that raises their bargaining power vis-à-vis Washington. The diplomatic self-interests of Latin American democracies have thus played a role in hampering international efforts to prevent authoritarian backsliding in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

In fact, left-wing populists have skillfully used the region's democracy-defense arrangements to abet their own internal assaults on democracy. International mechanisms to protect competitive rule were designed with dramatic threats, such as coups against elected presidents, in mind. When Chávez faced an irresolute attempted coup in 2002, these mechanisms helped him, just as they helped Evo Morales when he had to deal with mass protests in 2008. It is no small matter that chief executives, who naturally display solidarity with their counterparts elsewhere, are typically the ones who must apply these measures.⁹

Discriminatory legalism has so far proved a democracy-strangling tactic that the international community has found hard to rein in. Outsiders to a country must first pierce the veil of formal legality, and then decide when discrimination has become bad enough and broad enough to count as a violation of democracy. Left-wing populists typically move gradually to undermine democracy; where is the threshold that calls for international intervention? The most visible victims are usually legislators, high-court judges, and party politicians—not types that foreign presidents will feel most eager to rescue. As elected populist presidents squeeze and manipulate their opponents, diplomatic backing against the onslaught can prove scarce.

Because they can so easily be made to shield perpetrators more than victims, current democracy-protection protocols in the region are serving to undermine democracy and—however unintentionally—to further tilt the playing field in several countries. Like discriminatory legalism at home, the asymmetrical internationalism that informs regional coun-

cils helps to spread and entrench nondemocracy. The new competitive authoritarian regimes of Latin American leftist populism lack the harshness of old-school dictatorships, but they have achieved a degree of “perfection” (to borrow Mario Vargas Llosa’s ironic term) that even Mexico’s long-ruling PRI in its heyday could not rival.

A Surprising Threat

Historically, it has been the right that has done the most damage to competitive civilian rule in Latin America, so when a new threat from the left emerged during a time of what appeared to be democratic consolidation, many observers were surprised. For decades, oligarchs had stifled mass participation while soldiers mouthing anticommunist slogans had all too often intervened to crush popular empowerment and democracy. Leftists bore the brunt of the repression, learning to stop calling democracy a “bourgeois farce” and to embrace human-rights safeguards and checks on state power. Much of Latin America’s left has thus come to have strong democratic credentials.

Populist politicians, however, lack firm commitment to ideologies and principles and concentrate on the quest for personal power. The urge to boost the leader’s clout, the dislike of constitutional limits, and the harsh treatment of rivals make populism an inherent threat to democracy. Populists both right and left have displayed these tendencies, but the latter have done more damage to democracy with their greater staying power and more skillful efforts to hoard power, knock down institutional safeguards, squeeze opponents, and skew competition. Beneath a veneer of formal legality, these populists have blunted and even exploited the hemisphere’s methods for guarding against reversals of democracy.

With its claims to make democracy more direct and to be especially mindful of the poor, left-wing populism has crafted an attractive message. It has spread from Venezuela to several other countries and has stimulated interest elsewhere, especially Argentina. The temptations that it spawns make Chávez-style populism a particular threat to democracy.

This threat also seems to have clear limits, however. Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay, and now Colombia boast stable democracies. Steady institutions, pluralist party systems, and respectable government performance leave less room for populists. The downsides of Bolivarian populism, which include raging inflation, corruption, and violent crime, are well known and act as a deterrent. Left-wing populism and soft authoritarianism are unlikely to infect those countries.

Where leftists have achieved political success in those nations, they differ profoundly from Chávez. With coherent organizations and agendas, the Brazilian Workers’ Party, Chile’s Concertación, and Uruguay’s Broad Front have eschewed personalism and populism. Committed to existing institutions and gradual change, they have preserved and en-

riched democracy. Thus the authoritarian turn in Latin America today comes not from the left in general, but from a *populist* left that in certain countries is even more dangerous than its rightist forbear. The scrim of “progressive” rhetoric around this undemocratic style of politics only makes things worse.

Chávez’s death may abate this threat a bit, but competitive authoritarianism will likely persist and continue to hold appeal. The original Bolivarian leader is now gone, and Venezuelan subsidies may shrink, weakening especially Ortega in resource-poor Nicaragua. But the lessons of Chávez’s remarkable “success” live on and may inspire more imitators, particularly in Argentina. The undemocratic incumbents in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have entrenched their rule and wield many tools for extending it, aided by the commodities boom. Moreover, neither the domestic opposition nor the international community has found a way to stop discriminatory legalism. For these reasons, the end of the authoritarian trend in Latin America is not in sight.

NOTES

1. Scott Mainwaring, “The Surprising Resilience of Elected Governments,” *Journal of Democracy* 10 (July 1999): 101–14.

2. For this concept, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3. Democracy’s replacement by competitive authoritarianism has yet to take on sharp contours in every case. This suffocation is more evident in Venezuela under Chávez’s successor Nicolás Maduro, who has reacted to a spirited opposition challenge with ever more repression, than in Ecuador, where a weak, fragmented opposition allowed Correa to win an easy reelection victory in February 2013.

4. Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, “Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Latin America,” paper for 108th Annual Meeting, American Political Science Association, New Orleans, 30 August 2012; Raúl Madrid, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 178–83.

5. The longstanding debates on the concept of populism are reviewed in Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: ‘Populism’ in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34 (October): 1–22.

6. For a thorough analysis from an opposition standpoint, see Allan Brewer-Carías, *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chávez Authoritarian Experiment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7. Although Morales has imitated Chávez’s populist script, Morales rose as the leader of bottom-up social movements and therefore commands less personalistic autonomy and control.

8. Fabrice Lehoucq, “Bolivia’s Constitutional Breakdown,” *Journal of Democracy* 19 (October 2008): 110–24.

9. Dexter Boniface, “The OAS versus ALBA: The Clash Over Democracy and the Rule of Law in the Americas,” paper for 108th Annual Meeting, American Political Science Association, New Orleans, 30 August 2012.