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Populism and Democracy: An Analysis of the Outcomes of Populism*

Populismo y democracia: Un análisis de los resultados del populismo

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Abstract

An influential strand of literature has consolidated the idea that populism can also benefit democracy. However, even highly inclusionary experiences in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela suggest that the relationship with liberal institutions may not be populism's main democratic problem, and that the quality of populism-induced inclusion is inherently incompatible with populism's ultimate goal of realizing popular will. Unlike more vulnerable, traditional critiques based on liberal priorities, this, in turn, questions the recently accepted positive effects of populism, suggests that populism may, paradoxically, suffer from some of the same limitations of liberal institutions, and corroborates, from a more effective perspective, the idea that populism is inherently unlikely to favor democracy, be it liberal or not. Through the analysis of these problems, this article contributes to a critical reassessment of dominant understandings of the relationship between populism and democracy.

KEY WORDS

Democracy; populism; outcomes; quality of inclusion; popular will.

Resumen

Una influyente corriente de la literatura ha consolidado la idea que el populismo puede también beneficiar a la democracia. Sin embargo, incluso experiencias altamente incluyentes en Bolivia, Ecuador y Venezuela sugieren que la relación con las instituciones liberales no es posiblemente el principal problema democrático del populismo y que la calidad de la inclusión generada por el populismo es intrínsecamente incompatible con su principal objetivo de realizar la voluntad popular. A diferencia de críticas tradicionales más vulnerables basadas en prioridades liberales, esto, a su vez, cuestiona los efectos positivos del populismo recientemente aceptados, sugiere que el populismo puede paradójicamente sufrir de las mismas limitaciones de las instituciones liberales y corrobora, desde una perspectiva más eficaz, la idea que el populismo es intrínsecamente incapaz de favorecer la democracia, sea esta liberal o no. A través del análisis de estos problemas, este articulo contribuye a una revaluación critica de comprensiones dominantes de la relación entre populismo y democracia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Democracia, populismo, resultados, calidad de la inclusión, voluntad popular.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have devoted significant efforts to study populism, its constitutive features, and its democratic impact. Regarding the latter, long considered a danger for democracy, populism has been recently reassessed, with scholars such as Rovira Kaltwasser (2012), Stavrakakis et al. (2016), De la Torre (2010), and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a), highlighting both positive and negative effects on democracy, particularly, among the former, the ability to produce inclusionary outcomes. Such positive outcomes have been largely accepted, corroborating the idea that, though problematic in other respects, particularly in its relation with liberal institutions, populism can contribute to democracy (henceforth, ambivalence theories). The existence of significant convergence in a field notoriously characterized by disagreement is noteworthy, and it is even more notable once we consider its implications. The widespread recognition of a positive contribution in spite of other negative features can indeed present populism as a reasonable alternative to foster democracy.

In this paper, I examine the effects of populism in power and question these now dominant views. Does populism contribute to democracy when in power? In particular, do populism's recently recognized positive effects effectively contribute to democracy and to its primary goal of realizing popular will? Drawing on the highly inclusionary, and, therefore, expectedly democratically ambivalent, populist experiences in Morales's Bolivia, Correa's Ecuador, and the Bolivarian Venezuela, I maintain that due to the flawed quality of populism-induced inclusion, populism is inherently unlikely to provide a democratic contribution, independently of its impact on liberal institutions. This is the case then, even when democracy is defined on the basis of populists' democratic promises and the prioritization of popular will over liberal guarantees, thus, closer to what Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a: 10) describe as "*democracy without adjectives*", that is, a regime limited to "*the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule*".

Of course, the idea that populism is unlikely to contribute to democracy is not new. However, because of the common focus on the problematic relationship between populism and liberal institutions, the main reasons behind this conclusion may have been misunderstood, thus facilitating the recent rise of theories recognizing populism's democratic potential. Unlike more traditional arguments, in the attempt to offer a different and more productive critique, my assessment is not based on populism's negative effects on liberal institutions but, rather, on populism's own democratic goals, and on the problematic quality of its inclusionary outcomes. As explained below, this is important because a critique based on populism's illiberal effects would not undermine ambivalence theories, given that these theories precisely suggest, through a logical argument, that populism's illiberalism is not incompatible with certain democratic advances. Through its critique, this paper complements existing analyses that have first rejected populism's democratic ambivalence (e.g. Levitsky and Loxton 2013, 2012; Müller 2016; Weyland 2018).

With respect to the definition of populism, scholars have notoriously focused on different aspects, such as ideas (e.g. Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012a), or the personal features and strategy of political leaders, including their relationship with followers (e.g. Weyland, 2001). In this paper, populism is defined on the basis of Mudde's (2004: 543) increasingly accepted definition, where populism corresponds to an anti-elite ideology celebrating popular will. This provides the opportunity to highlight crucial goals and features of populist forces. At the same time, as observed by scholars adopting ideational definitions such as Pappas (2016) and Hawkins (2010: 42-43), charismatic, personalistic leaderships significantly contribute to populism's success, and should therefore be considered, even from the perspective of ideational definitions, to properly understand populism in power. All of the cases examined in this paper have combined a populist ideology à la Mudde (2004) and – in Venezuela until Chávez's death – a charismatic leadership. While the effects of Chávez's charismatic leadership are important also to understand successive developments (see next sections), in Bolivia, as discussed below, Morales's charismatic leadership coexisted with vigorous social movements (see Anria, 2010: 122; and Madrid, 2008).

In the next sections, first, I present existing views on the relationship between populism and democracy. Then, I explain why the flaws of populism-induced inclusion make a populist democratic contribution inherently unlikely. After discussing these not ignored but commonly underestimated flaws, and after justifying the selection of the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan cases, I examine examples from these experiences. Besides examining the outcomes of populism, this paper also contributes to the more general debate on democracy and democratization. In particular, it aims to shed light on the complexities of the relationship between democracy and inclusion[1].

2. POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY

Observers have traditionally considered populism as a negative factor for the prospects of democracy. However, a strand of literature that has been gaining strength in the last few years has highlighted its multi-faceted effects. Among these authors, Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) maintains that, once examined through the Dahlian concepts of public contestation and inclusion, populism can affect the former, but is also conducive to a more inclusive political regime. In a somehow similar vein, though aware of its illiberal features and the potentially negative effects of a strong leader, Stavrakakis et al. (2016) observe that populism can facilitate the inclusion of excluded social groups and hence correct democracies' tendency to ignore the people in their major decisions. Similarly, while distinguishing democracy from its more specific liberal version, in a recent

[1] On this point, though recognizing some of the limitations of the Bolivian incorporation process, in a recent, interesting critique to existing measures of democracy, Wolff (2018) observes that political incorporation should be measured to avoid missing crucial democratic advances, and, hence, to properly evaluate the quality of democracy.

interview (Flores and Ortega, 2016: 21), Mudde observes that, although "populism goes against core elements of liberal democracy, notably minority rights, pluralism, and separation of powers", it does embrace popular sovereignty and democracy. Though recognizing some of the problems discussed in this paper such as the lack of autonomy of the newly incorporated (chapter 5), also De la Torre (2010) tends to accept the ambivalence thesis noting how, in spite of its negative impact on liberal institutions, "Populism continues to be an important democratizing force that has mobilized those previously excluded from participation in government" (148). More generally, according to Canovan (1999), by favoring the renewal of its institutions, populism may contribute to the vitality of democracy, and, therefore, to a political system closer to the people. In short, among the aforementioned arguments, a crucial, recurring theme is that populism conflicts with liberal institutions but, at the same time, can produce democratic benefits through its inclusionary effects. This idea has gained significant influence, such to achieve, according to Ruth (2018: 356), the status of "tentative consensus" in the field of populism studies.

Despite the current tendency to recognize populism's democratic ambivalence, other scholars have instead reaffirmed its predominantly undemocratic impact. According to Levitsky and Loxton (2013, 2012), populism is inclusionary, but its negative impact on liberal institutions is conducive to competitive authoritarianism, thus, proving, as explained in their 2012 study, an obstacle to the rise of new majorities. By underlining its anti-pluralism and its negative consequences, including exclusion, with a similar focus on liberal institutions, Müller (2016: 55-56) notes that populism's negative impact on these institutions inevitably extends to elections and "democracy as such", in an argument, apparently, though not explicitly, linking populism with competitive authoritarian scenarios, while, according to Weyland (2018), populism's problem lies in the fact that populists' personalistic relationship with followers makes attacks on both liberal institutions and opponents ready to counterattack a strategic necessity. Recently, Houle and Kenny (2018) have maintained that besides affecting the rule of law and institutional checks to the concentration of power, populism in power also fails to bring about advances in certain dimensions of redistribution and participation.

In brief, in line with a more traditional view, populism has been long conceived as pernicious for democracy, primarily because of its effects on liberal institutions. Then, following the emergence of what is today a highly influential school of thought, populism has been increasingly viewed as producing ambivalent effects on democracy, thanks to its positive impact on inclusion. Finally, recent contributions have advanced doubts on such ambivalence, thus providing a first critique. The jury, then, is still out, and different views on populism continue to have significant implications.

Though recognizing the crucial contribution of ambivalence theories in highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon, I argue that the analysis of underestimated problems inescapably associated with populism questions the democratic virtues recently attributed to populist projects. More specifically, on the basis of the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan cases, I argue that

populism's problems go beyond the largely recognized weakening of liberal institutions and affect the quality of that same populism-induced inclusion supposedly responsible for populism's democratic advances. By affecting populism's primary goal of realizing popular will, such problems make populism's democratic contribution inherently unlikely, even when democracy is defined according to a populist perspective. Paradoxically, then, in terms of general democratic outcomes, populism may be affected by a crucial limitation of many liberal democracies, that is the difficulty in translating inclusion – occurring through the formal extension of civil and political rights in the case of liberal democratic institutions – into the realization of popular will. Whereas, among the considered populist cases, De la Torre (2014: 457) views Correa's failure to produce participatory democratic benefits as an "exception", my analysis suggests that, even in this realm, populism's democratic contribution is inherently problematic.

Importantly, the argument that I present in this paper is different from previous contributions. As noted above, unlike traditional critiques, it does not focus on populism's negative impact on liberal institutions. This would make it vulnerable to ambivalence theories because such theories recognize, and reasonably incorporate, populism's illiberalism in their reasoning. By focusing on populism's own democratic goals and inclusionary effects, my argument complements, from a different perspective, more recent contributions that have first questioned populism's ambivalence. In the case of Levitsky and Loxton's (2012, 2013) contribution, though raising important points, populism's negative effects on democracy continue to be essentially associated with its impact on liberal institutions. Although I recognize that declining liberal institutions may, depending on the intensity of such decline, corroborate the quality problems of populism's inclusionary effects (see below), I argue that the main reasons behind populism's inadequacy to produce democratic benefits lie elsewhere. Similarly, Müller (2016) is right in underlining the relevance of liberal institutions for the electoral process and, therefore, for "democracy as such", but, considering that populism's negative impact on these institutions may be more or less intense, and therefore not sufficient to violate the freedom and fairness of elections, what he describes as its anti-pluralism and the resulting exclusionary effects should be assessed independently of liberal institutions to effectively challenge populism's democratic ambivalence. Moreover, however important, populism's anti-pluralistic conception of reality does not seem to automatically translate into practices able to question populism's democratic ambivalence as, instead, apparently suggested by Müller (2016). Rather, such practices appear influenced by populism's interaction and association with relevant factors and contexts (see next section). Finally, unlike Houle and Kenny (2018), who provide empirical evidence that populism may be less effective than expected in producing certain dimensions of inclusion, I do not question the ability of populism to produce inclusion but, rather, the quality of the latter and, as a consequence, its contribution to democracy. To be sure, the problems affecting populism-induced inclusion, discussed in the next section, have been considered by the literature on populism. However, this paper does not aim to merely report them, but, rather, show that their impact on populism's alleged democratic virtues, on its primary goal of realizing

popular will, and, ultimately, on democracy, however defined, may have been underestimated. For example, some of those same authors supporting the ambivalence thesis recognize some of these problems, yet without viewing them as incompatible with the idea that populism's inclusionary effects can contribute to democracy. Demonstrating that this is not the case and that populism is inherently unlikely to realize its own democratic goals, not just liberal priorities, is among the goals of this paper.

Among recent cases of populist rule, the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan cases are particularly appropriate to examine populism's ability to generate democratic benefits through inclusion. Given the extent of their inclusionary outcomes and the highly exclusionary character of preexisting societies, they can be viewed as "most-likely" cases (Eckstein 1992: 158) for ambivalence theories. As suggested by Eckstein (1992: 158), when examining a theory, a "most-likely" case is a case where the theory is expected to work and where its potential disconfirmation is therefore particularly significant. Arguably corroborating the interpretation of these experiences as "most-likely" cases for ambivalence theories, Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 200) describes the ambivalence hypothesis as particularly applicable to highly exclusionary societies, while referring, together with Mudde, to the Bolivian and Venezuelan experiences as "prototypical" of Latin American populism and its inclusionary features (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Coherently, advocates of populism's democratic ambivalence have resorted to some of these experiences and their inclusionary features to support their theses, including Stavrakakis et al.'s (2016) analysis of Chavista populism, and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2012: 199) reference to Evo Morales's inclusionary approach.

Of course, highlighting the flaws of populism and of its inclusionary effects is not to say that non-populist governments or the contested status quo are necessarily better, more democratic, or that they do not produce exclusion. For example, even without considering the way it rose to power, the government that succeeded Morales in Bolivia presented non-democratic traits. Similarly, the goal of this paper is not to normatively assess the governments under consideration.

With respect to the concept of inclusion, as highlighted by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2013) and Levitsky and Loxton's (2012) discussion and adoption of Filc's definition, besides its material dimension, inclusion also presents a symbolic and political side, ranging from aspects such as representation, participation, and discursive inclusion, to how material resources are assigned. While inclusion may be always valuable, we should not assume that it necessarily leads to popular sovereignty, and, therefore, to democracy. In accordance with a populist perspective, I view inclusion as more likely to contribute to popular sovereignty and the realization of popular will when it is comprehensive, non-discriminatory, and when it provides the newly included with the opportunity to autonomously influence public decision-making.

3. UNDERESTIMATED PROBLEMS?

The analysis of populism-induced inclusion requires a more general examination of populism's effects. Besides suggesting that populism is democratically ambivalent, building on minimal definitions such as Mudde's (2004), Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 198-199) observes that some of its main inclusionary and exclusionary outcomes result from the specific ideologies with which it combines. Following from this argument, populism would not be necessarily bad for democracy, and it would not be responsible for effects resulting from other ideologies such as the exclusionary and authoritarian features characterizing European populist experiences (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012: 198-199). The argument separating the effects of populism from those of other ideologies is compelling, shedding light, in turn, on its multiple forms. However, as discussed also by Enyedi (2017), and Arato and Cohen (2017: 287), while populism's inclusionary effects do not seem to represent an exclusive feature of populist projects, a number of negative effects appear instead associated with its constitutive elements.

With respect to the latter effects, problems of different nature have recurrently affected populism. Though not necessarily a primary concern for populists, in line with what was discussed in the previous section, significant consensus, including Enyedi (2017), seems to exist on the intrinsically troubled relationship between populism and liberal institutions, and on the tendency of the former to erode the latter. Moreover – and much more central both from a populist perspective and for the goals of this paper – populism seems to be associated with problems such as the arbitrary exclusion of significant segments of the people, restrained popular participation in public decision-making, and the creation of unaccountable elites. These, not ignored, but arguably underestimated problems, are particularly serious, because they question the inclusionary advances of populism, their contribution to the realization of popular will, and, therefore, a large part of what have been recognized as populism's democratic benefits. Importantly, they do not necessarily result from populism's impact on liberal institutions. Moreover, they can also limit the inclusionary potential of other inclusionary ideologies that have occasionally combined with populism, such as in the case of leftist ideologies in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In line with the previous section, this last point does not suggest that a non-populist left is necessarily better or more democratic than a populist one.

With respect to populism's exclusionary effects, coherently with Mudde's (2004) reference to populists' characteristic identification of a corrupt part of society, these are recognized even by proponents of ambivalence theories (Mudde 2015: paragraph 8; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Although these authors do not seem to consider these effects as capable of denying populism's positive outcomes, their severity in some of the most inclusionary populist experiences (see below) may suggest otherwise[2]. In particular, populism's exclusionary tendencies appear especially intense

[2] For example, as suggested by Houle and Kenny (2018), the demobilization of opponents may be responsible for populism's failure to improve the electoral turnout in Latin America.

in already highly exclusionary societies where the high polarization resulting from both populism and powerful traditional elites often provide further incentives for exclusion[3,4]. This is not irrelevant, given that, according to Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 200), the hypothesis of populism's democratic ambivalence is precisely based on its inclusionary, redeeming effects in these societies.

The creation of unaccountable elites and restrained popular participation in public decision-making are no less problematic. As noted above, according to Pappas (2016) and Hawkins (2010: 42-43), charismatic, personalistic leaders favor populism's success, which, in turn, suggests that they are a likely element of populism in power, even when populism is defined in ideational terms. Even though such leaders may be committed to the advancement of popular sectors, the preponderance and largely unquestionable character of such leadership undermines populist administrations' accountability, and, as it has often been noted, followers' autonomous participation in public decision making. Once again, these problems seem more intense where polarization is high[5], which is, as noted above, a recurrent condition when populism combine with pre-existing exclusionary contexts, and, therefore, with scenarios that should, instead, supposedly highlight populism's democratic potential.

In short, because of the likely problematic features described above, however valuable in other respects, the type of inclusion resulting from populist governments is unlikely to contribute to popular sovereignty and to the realization of popular will. Certainly, in countries such as Chávez's Venezuela, populism may have contributed to generate popular support for inclusionary ideologies and, therefore, to win the resistance of reluctant economic and political elites. However, populism is not always successful in making inclusionary policies more popular. Furthermore, what is suggested here is not that populism cannot produce inclusion, but, rather, that this kind of inclusion is unlikely to contribute to popular sovereignty.

In the next sections, I examine the previously discussed outcomes in light of examples from the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan cases. These are not meant to provide definitive evidence, and they cannot capture all the complexities of these experiences. Yet, they may serve to highlight the need for a reconsideration of dominant interpretations of the relationship between populism and democracy. Importantly, as reminded above, the goal is not to merely report problems that are, in part, already known, but, rather, to highlight how their impact may have been underestimated, thus leading to more optimistic views of the democratic potential of populism.

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[3] According to Weyland (2018), who conceives populism as a strategy, the clash between personalistic populists and opponents would originate from the strategic and organizational needs of the former and would even likely lead to the death of democracy.

[4] With a similar logic, Balderacchi (2016) shows how exclusionary, polarized contexts can affect the inclusiveness of participatory mechanisms.

[5] See, for example, Stavrakakis et al. (2016: 71), on the relation between Chávez and followers under intense polarization, discussed below.

4. INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

The rise to power of Chávez, Correa, and Morales at the turn of the century initiated a new era in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In each of these countries, populist governments promoted the adoption of a new constitution and the development of inclusionary policies, including, with different fortunes, both economic programs aimed at the most vulnerable sectors and participatory initiatives. At the same time, in line with their populist ideology, they developed a polarizing discourse, often targeting and delegitimizing the opposition. In a context characterized by pre-existing exclusion and powerful traditional elites, the divisive ideas and transformational goals of populist forces were, in turn, met with resistance and, sometimes, undemocratic means, such as the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002. The resulting high polarization strengthened the exclusionary nature of the populists' ideology, fostering further exclusion of those not supporting the government, be they conservative members of the opposition, or even actors with apparently solid popular credentials.

To be sure, these populist experiences are notoriously subject to different, and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Yet, as shown below, a considerable number of authors seem to converge on the existence of significant exclusionary measures. In Venezuela, the tension and polarization resulting from both the government and the opposition created a climate of distrust that reinforced populist exclusionary tendencies, in a process extending beyond those responsible for the most aggressive and less democratic anti-government strategies. Among some of the most notorious examples, in the years following the attempted coup, the government was accused of discriminating those who signed to promote the 2004 recall referendum and whose names were published in the now well-known Lista Tascón (see, for example, Kornblith, 2013: 52). Some evidence of such discriminatory practices is provided by Hsieh et al. (2011), who note that the earnings and employment probability of signers declined after the publication of their names. Moreover, in a process primarily affecting the opposition, hundreds of candidates were excluded from elections in violation of the Constitution, such as in the 2008 regional contest (Corrales and Hidalgo, 2013: 57). Over time, exclusionary policies became more explicit. In the wake of Chávez's death, a minister explicitly encouraged political discrimination within the public administration (Kornblith, 2013: fn. 12 drawing on El Nacional), while, in 2016, the government announced the removal of public managers who had supported the attempted recall referendum against Maduro (Chinea and Kai, 2016). In part fueled by the 2014 anti-government protests, under Maduro, similar exclusionary practices intensified, as demonstrated by the cases of Popular Will leader Leopoldo López, and former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, the first sentenced to about fourteen years of prison (see Lafuente, 2015), the second barred from public offices for 15 years (see Telesur, 2017). In addition, in controversial processes, in the months preceding the 2018 presidential election, opposition parties such as Primero Justicia and the MUD coalition were banned (see Clarín, 2018). Besides political opponents, exclusion apparently extended to groups that are commonly associated, even from a leftist populist perspective, with the concept of the people. For example, according to García-Guadilla (2018:76), influenced by existing polarization, exclusionary

practices often characterized the inclusionary initiatives of the Chávez administrations, with exclusion "[applying] not only to those who oppose the regime—mainly the middle and upper classes—but also to popular sectors that do not align ideologically with the Bolivarian process of transformation".

Even in Bolivia, where some social organizations were able to partially constrain the action of the executive, and where the government adopted, on some matters, a certain dose of pragmatism, populism's divisive character, and the highly polarized context, favored the exclusion of actors opposing or not embracing the government's project. In the years following Morales's rise to power, former presidents and other political opponents were the target of investigations. These, and other practices, including the apparently biased disqualification of opposition candidates, the removal of elected officials, and the political use of justice, became part of a more general approach of the Morales government towards the opposition (Sánchez-Sibony, 2021). With respect to the latter, in a practice then further developed under the Áñez government, the politicization of justice certainly represented a major source of concern under Morales. Recently, when key members of the opposition expressed concerns on this matter, they were dismissed, among other labels, by Minister of the Presidency Martínez, as "golpistas" (Agencia EFE, 2017). Moreover, when in disagreement, governmental accusations of proximity to conservative or imperialist goals delegitimized and marginalized critical civil society organizations such as NGOs or indigenous groups (Achtenberg, 2015; Webber, 2017). As noted by Webber (2017: 340), the strategies of the MAS ruling party, in the clash with certain indigenous organizations, even included the violent occupation of the CONAMAQ's headquarters and the attempt of pro-government supporters to remove CIDOB's leadership. Also an author underlining the inclusionary advances of the Bolivian experience, such as Wolff (2018: 9), notes how the alliance with the government was a necessary condition for the incorporation of different categories of popular organizations.

In Ecuador, while delegitimizing the opposition with his proclaims, after his election, Correa's project of a constituent assembly resulted in a conflict with traditional parties. This led to an institutional crisis with Congress, decisive for his political project, and, possibly, for the survival of his government. In a highly polarized process involving drastic measures on both sides, a key outcome was the ousting of numerous legislators of the opposition following a decision of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (see Conaghan, 2008: 51-52). After defeating and marginalizing the opposition, Correa developed a low toleration towards criticism, as shown by his relation with civil society organizations and social movements. As observed by Becker (2013), Correa delegitimized social movements that opposed his policies as instruments of the right (56-57), while, in the clash between the government and social movements over extractive policies, numerous activists were accused of terrorism, including the leaders of some of the largest indigenous organizations of the country (52). Similarly, besides describing the verbal attacks and charges of terrorism as part of the government's "bullying" against the indigenous movement (41), De la Torre (2013: 40) notes how charges of terrorism were filed, "with scant evidence", also against leftist students. Moreover, environmental and other civil so-

ciety organizations, including Acción Ecológica, Fundación Pachamama, and Fundamedios, were shut down or targeted through decrees later repealed by Correa's successor, Moreno (El Comercio, 2017), in what amounted, according to the government's critics, to the repression of dissent. Among them, Wilkinson (2015: paragraph 1) describes the Correa administration as "harassing, intimidating, and punishing environmental activists and indigenous leaders".

In short, the relationship between these governments and actors that opposed or did not share their projects was complex and characterized by different nuances that cannot be fully addressed here. However, under conditions of significant polarization resulting from both populism and contextual conditions, even for groups with strong popular credentials, the status of legitimate members of the people became increasingly contingent – rather than on pre-determined, however constructed and arbitrary, populist criteria – on their loyalty to ruling populist forces. According to authors such as Müller (2016: 20), and Arato and Cohen (2017: 287-289), such a precondition for inclusion, and the resulting exclusion, would be intrinsic to populism and its "*pars pro toto*" conception of popular representation. However, the effects of such conception were magnified by its interaction with pre-existing exclusionary contexts, where, in principle, populism's positive effects should have emerged with more clarity. Although the generation of exclusionary effects is not exclusive to populist projects, this, in turn, severely undermined the ability of otherwise valuable inclusionary efforts to contribute to the realization of popular will, and, therefore, to the advancement of populism's democratic goals.

5. INCLUSION AND PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING

Another problem affecting more positive or ambivalent assessments of populism is the tendency to assess inclusion without fully considering the ability of the newly included to influence public decision-making. This ability is crucially affected by the typically preponderant role of populist leaders. Similar to populism's exclusionary effects, the problem has long been recognized (see, for example, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012: 192; Canovan, 1999: 14), but somehow underestimated in the analysis of populism's impact on democracy.

Although they were accompanied by different social actors, particularly in Bolivia, in each of these countries, Chávez, Correa, and Morales played a fundamental role, and significantly personalized, though to a different extent, the three revolutions. As it is generally acknowledged, even among those recognizing more positive or ambivalent outcomes, in turn, the centrality of these leaders inevitably produced an impact on the nature of these experiences, complicating the rise of autonomous views. For example, in Venezuela, according to Ellner (2011), among a number of initiatives favoring popular empowerment, Chávez's undisputed leadership undermined "collective decision-making", (434), the selection of leaders from below (435), "internal debate" (439) and, ultimately, "diversity of positions" (447). Similarly, though underlining the empowering impact of a charismatic leadership

on popular sectors and the existence of bottom-up impulses, Stavrakakis et al. (2016) highlight a number of negative effects associated with Chávez's all-powerful leadership, including the marginalization of the movement on essential decisions (63), and the frustration of what these authors define as "an egalitarian emancipation of the people" (63). The danger of equating inclusion with quality inclusion is apparent in Correa's Ecuador where inclusion, following De la Torre (2013, 2014), did not even translate into the permanent mobilization of popular sectors, which was instead subordinated to technocratic rule. In fact, Correa's persona and personalistic political project arguably played against the development of an autonomous movement that could have emerged from the *forajidos* revolt in 2005, when the citizenry contributed to the fall of an increasingly authoritarian Gutiérrez. Similarly, Correa certainly represented the toughest competitor of pre-existing and already relevant social organizations, such as the indigenous movement. In Bolivia, popular participation certainly proved more autonomous, with social movements sometimes effectively influencing the action of the government, thus contributing to higher quality inclusion. However, this resulted from the almost unique and mutually convenient relationship between Morales and social movements, not from the typical features of populist governments. On the latter, similar to other populist cases, the relationship between social movements and Morales included, as observed by Anria (2010: 122), also "top-down attempts of cooptation by a charismatic leader".

The valuable analyses of Ellner (2011) and Stavrakakis et al. (2016) are useful to understand why the problem may be underestimated. For example, although his focus is on the Venezuelan experience rather than populism, besides recognizing Chavismo's empowering impact, what emerges from Ellner's (2011) account is that, however negative in the aforementioned aspects, the reverence for Chávez did not completely prevent the existence of dissent and diverging opinions within Chavismo. Yet, it can be argued that the largely undisputed role of the leader and its effects on the party and the movement may facilitate the repression of that remaining area of dissent, particularly when this is no longer considered acceptable, as arguably demonstrated under Maduro.

Similarly, in an analysis recognizing populism's democratic potential, supporters of populism's democratic ambivalence, such as Stavrakakis et al. (2016), do acknowledge the inherent nature of the leadership problem and that the overall positive impact of populism is contingent on its resolution, but they seem to end up underestimating its complexity. In particular, they view the problem as resolvable through leaders, defined as "vanishing mediators", willing to cede power and avoid the perpetuation of their leadership (Stavrakakis et al., 2016). Unfortunately, this solution does not appear as viable, at least in Latin America. In this region, by promoting the removal or revision of term limits with different fortunes, both populist and non-populist leaders have shown their attachment to power, including Cartes in Paraguay, Chávez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador, Fujimori in Peru, Hernández in Honduras, Morales in Bolivia, and Uribe in Colombia. Moreover, Stavrakakis et al. (2016) may be certainly right in arguing that, in the case of Chávez, a number of contextual factors, particularly polarization, contributed to a non-"vanishing" leader. As these authors note, referring

to the risk of followers passively subject to a charismatic leader and to the resulting failure to bring about popular empowerment: "Avoiding such an outcome would require a delicate balancing act that neither Chávez was willing to undertake nor the movements were prepared to demand or to impose in an extremely polarized political setting" (Stavrakakis et al., 2016: 71). Unfortunately, populism inherently contributes to polarization. Therefore, the unfeasibility of a "vanishing" leader in Venezuela was not simply related to Venezuela's specific conditions but, also, to populism's intrinsic features.

Following authors such as Levitsky and Loxton (2012), concerns regarding the ability of the newly included to influence public decision-making emerge also with respect to the widely recognized troubled relationship between populism and liberal institutions. As reminded above, according to these authors (2012) and their analysis of Fujimori's Peru, by undermining liberal rights, populism can hinder the rise of new majorities and lead to the emergence of competitive authoritarianism, a thesis reasserted in their 2013 study of the Andean region. Unlike similar arguments stressing a direct relationship between populism and competitive authoritarianism, in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, a number of additional factors seem to have contributed to the significant weakening of liberal democracy and the extent of populism's negative impact on liberal institutions is therefore unclear[6]. More generally, populism appears insufficient to explain the decline of horizontal accountability (Ruth, 2018), or the emergence of competitive authoritarianism, even under favorable institutional conditions (see Balderacchi, 2018). However, as explained below, in these countries, declining liberal guarantees have certainly affected the ability of the people to effectively express their preferences. Therefore, though not decisive, populism's (not easily measurable) contribution to the erosion of liberal institutions appears to have reinforced the problem of low-quality inclusion deriving from its other problematic features. Interestingly, in some recent cases, the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan governments have adopted manipulations similar to those described by Levitsky and Loxton (2012) in Fujimori's Peru, such as the creation of obstacles to opposition-sponsored referenda. In particular, by transforming elected bodies into empty shells, or by hindering popular referenda, in these three countries, dubiously independent courts or institutions devoid of direct popular legitimacy were key to constrain popular preferences, despite populism's emphasis on popular will and its wariness towards liberal institutions[7]. For example, in Venezuela, following legislative elections providing the opposition with a resounding majority in 2015, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) made the National Assembly increasingly irrelevant. The functions of the National Assembly were eventually assumed by the new government-sponsored National Constituent Assembly, an institution, boycotted by the opposition, whose members were elected, according to Partlett (2017), through electoral rules designed to favor

[6] See also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012b: 210), regarding Venezuela.

[7] Referring to the Bolivian and Venezuelan cases, according to Weyland (2018: 331), the mutable commitment towards national-level direct popular consultations would not be surprising, but, rather, a consequence of populism's intrinsic opportunism. However, a similar approach does not seem rare.

the government. In Ecuador, under Correa, the National Electoral Council (CNE) arguably hindered the attempts to promote referenda on policies or proposals supported by the government, such as the removal of term limits for elected officials (see El Universo, 2015) and the government's extractive policies in the Yasuni National Park (see Wilkinson, 2015). In Bolivia, in February 2016, a referendum promoted by the government to modify the constitution and enable President Morales to run for reelection was defeated. However, in November 2017, a controversial sentence of the Constitutional Tribunal removed constitutional term limits for all elected officials.

In short, sometimes not fully considered, in other cases viewed as a tractable problem, inclusion characterized by restrained popular participation in public decision-making has represented a recurrent trait of populist experiences in power. Although inclusion may still be considered as valuable, when affected by these problems, it does not appear compatible with the idea of realizing popular will, and, therefore, democracy.

6. POPULISM AS A SOLUTION FOR UNACCOUNTABLE ELITES?

Related to some of the previously examined problems, populism also presents features capable of creating a context favorable to unchecked actors in pursuit of personal interests. This, of course, directly contradicts populism's goal to transfer power from de facto unaccountable elites to the people.

As observed by Hawkins (2010: 170), charismatic leaderships make populist movements more dependent on the leader. At the same time, as reminded above, according to both Hawkins (2010: 42) and Pappas (2016), the presence of a charismatic leader increases populism's chances of success, thus raising the likelihood that a charismatic leader will accompany populism in power. The crucial contributions and the resulting essential role of leaders in governing populist projects may transform them into largely unquestionable, and, therefore, unaccountable elements. These features are reinforced by what, as noted in the previous section, Stavrakakis et al. (2016: 71) described, in the Venezuelan case, as the tendency of both the populist leader and his followers to accept a relationship skewed towards the dominance of the former in the presence of polarization. Besides creating an essential and largely unquestionable leader, populism is also largely believed to weaken liberal institutions, thus possibly creating an explosive combination where both vertical and horizontal accountability are weakened (on the concepts of vertical and horizontal accountability, see O'Donnell, 1998). Even leaving aside the dangers posed to the minority, in such a scenario, the leader or other groups or individuals close to the former may take advantage of such a context to pursue personalistic interests, thus undermining the realization of popular will, and, therefore, the very own goals of populist projects.

For example, in Venezuela, in a similar scenario marked by the existence of different factions within Chavismo, groups of power have, apparently, insulated themselves from any effective system

of control, to allegedly take part in a number of highly questionable practices. Among them, the so-called *boliburgueses*, who, according to Naím (2013: paragraph 9), "have amassed enormous wealth through corrupt deals with the government". Moreover, an investigation of the Associated Press (Dreier and Goodman, 2016) has highlighted how groups within the military profited from the food crisis in Venezuela through kickbacks, overpayments, and the provision of licenses to non-functioning companies. In the attempt to reject the relationship between socialism and corruption, Ellner (2016) notes that what favored corruption under Chavismo was not socialism but, rather, among other factors, insufficient efforts to develop the rank and file, and, therefore, control from below. Ellner (2016) seems to be right on the lack of an inherent link between socialism and corruption. However, if he is correct on the importance of the rank and file to check corruption, then a more significant link may exist between populism and corruption, given populism's aforementioned negative impact on a balanced relationship between leaders and followers.

Moreover, though rejected by the government, and coming from one of its traditional rivals, significant charges have concerned top Venezuelan officials. Recently, U.S. institutions have accused current and former prominent Venezuelan state officials, including former vice-president El Aissami, of crimes related to drug trafficking (see Hernández and Brodzinsky, 2017). It is worth noting that some of these accusations were formulated or refer to years preceding Maduro's rise to power (Hernández and Brodzinsky, 2017). Later, in May 2018, on the eve of the presidential election confirming Maduro in power, the U.S. government eventually sanctioned the former President of the Constituent Assembly Cabello, accusing him, as well as Maduro, of activities related to drug trafficking (Wroughton, 2018). Interestingly – in what might be viewed as a further example of the negative consequences of a largely unquestionable populist leadership should the accusations against Cabello be confirmed – Ellner (2011: 436) notes that, on different occasions, Chávez ignored the preferences of the Chavista base in his decisions to support and impose Cabello from above.

To be sure, the existence of power groups insulated from both vertical and horizontal controls is a recurrent trait of many countries. However, what emerges from the previous discussion is that, because of its inherent features, populism may reproduce and, in some cases, even deepen the problem. This questions the idea of populism as a medicine for democracies under the control of unaccountable elites. Moreover, other cases such as Berlusconi in Italy suggests that, even in more consolidated democracies, populism risks being accompanied by actors that, far from realizing popular preferences, may pursue highly personalistic interests taking advantage of mild or non-existent control from their own followers. During his administrations, Berlusconi promoted a number of what have been commonly defined as *ad personam* laws, that is, laws that, according to Berlusconi's critics, pursued his personal interests to the detriment of the common good. These laws have reportedly ranged from attempts to help Berlusconi in his trials, to measures favoring his economic interests (La Repubblica, 2009). Though limited – but only in part – by relatively solid liberal institutions, in an increasingly polarized context, Berlusconi's alleged attempts to

subordinate public interests to his personal goals have been hardly questioned by his voters and the members of his party. As noted by Mariotti (2011: 52) in her description of interviews with members of Berlusconi's Forza Italia sitting in Parliament: "every interviewee showed a desire to please the leader and to avoid disappointing him, just as a child might do with a parent".

In short, rather than promoting a political system more responsive to popular preferences, the features of populism may actually favor the pursuit of personalistic interests to the detriment of the common good, thus questioning, once again, populism's inclusionary democratic benefits.

7. CONCLUSIONS

As highlighted throughout the paper, the problematic relation between populist inclusion and popular sovereignty questions populism's recently recognized democratic benefits, and, therefore, the now largely accepted idea of populism's democratic ambivalence. In particular, it suggests that populism's problematic aspects do not primarily concern its relationship with liberal institutions, and that populism is prone to failure with respect to its own democratic goals, not just those of liberalism. Interestingly and paradoxically, then, if we consider that liberal institutions have also ensured a certain type of inclusion though the formal extension of individual rights, populism may share an important limitation of liberal institutions in many democracies, namely the difficulty in translating inclusion into the realization of popular will. As noted above, the goal of this paper was not to provide a general assessment of the governments under consideration. Accordingly, the examples described in the previous sections were not meant to provide a detailed account of the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Venezuelan cases, but, rather, to help problematize what is now an established understanding of populism's impact on democracy.

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