

# *Populism in Venezuela: The Nature of Chavismo*

Antonio Lecuna

The situation in Venezuela is spinning out of control. The economy is shriveling at double-digit rates, corruption is generalized, and the nightmare of hyperinflation has returned with a vengeance. What happened? The difficulties suffered during the Chavismo era were predictable consequences of the policy choices of the past six decades. These policy choices led to the populist principles underlying Chavismo, which prioritizes the struggle against individual poverty and social exclusion at the expense of institutionalization and fiscal discipline.

## *Populist Venezuela*

With populism as a common ground, the following two distinctive periods divide the last half-century: Puntofijismo (1959–98) and Chavismo (1999–present). The Punto Fijo Pact, or Puntofijismo, became a powerful subsidized coalition between the two dominant parties, i.e., the Democratic Action Party (AD) and the Social Christian Party (COPEI), which governed without competition through compromise and shared spoils.<sup>1</sup> The AD represented the workers and peasants and advocated for state

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1. Ronald D. Sylvia and Constantine P. Danopoulos, “The Chávez Phenomenon: Political Change in Venezuela,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2003): 64–65.

intervention and land redistribution, whereas the COPEI represented the interests of the church, businesses, and the social elite.<sup>2</sup>

Long before Chávez or Maduro, the presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt (1959–64), Raúl Leoni (1964–69), and Rafael Caldera (1969–74) were considered populist. Betancourt implemented aggressive land reforms aiming to break up large landholdings, Leoni cemented the infamous import substitute industrialization (ISI) policies, while Caldera rendered the Venezuelan economy more inward-looking and required that all private companies have majority ownership by Venezuelans.<sup>3</sup> After the first decade of Puntofijismo, somewhere between President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–79) and President Luis Herrera Campins (1979–84) with the nationalization process of the oil industry, populism intensified and shifted into second gear when the two parties succumbed to the corrupting powers of petrodollars.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently, in late 1998, at the epicenter of a complete lack of authority and legitimacy, populism became increasingly more radical when a young Hugo Chávez swept the presidential elections. To some individuals, the divine presence of Chávez represented the only hope for the desperately poor and a shining champion of the radical left, which refuses to die in Latin America. To other individuals, Chávez was a Marxist-Communist totalitarian with no intention of stepping down from power or releasing institutional control over the oil riches.<sup>5</sup> Chávez has been called the new Bolívar, Castro's successor, an authoritarian dictator, a charismatic leader, a crafty politician, a buffoon, and, above all, a ranting populist.<sup>6</sup>

The Chavismo phenomenon is unquestionably populist because it “relies on a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, a relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalized party, that bases itself on a powerful, Manichaean discourse of ‘the people versus the elite’

2. Oliver Heath, “Explaining the Rise of Class Politics in Venezuela,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 2 (2009): 188.

3. Hugo J. Faria, “Hugo Chávez against the Backdrop of Venezuelan Economic and Political History,” *Independent Review* 12, no. 4 (2008): 522–23.

4. Pedro Sanoja, “Ideology, Institutions, and Ideas: Explaining Political Change in Venezuela,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 3 (2009): 400.

5. Antonio Lecuna, “Subnational Atomization as a Factor of Increasing Corruption in Venezuela,” *Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios Municipales* 17 (January–July 2018): 7.

6. Sylvia and Danopoulos, “The Chávez Phenomenon,” p. 63.

that encourages an ‘anything goes’ attitude among Chávez’s supporters.”<sup>7</sup> Populism has been particularly active in Latin America. The growing list of legendary populist presidents includes Juan Domingo Perón (1946–55, 1973–74) and Néstor Kirchner (2003–7) in Argentina, Getulio Vargas (1951–54), João Goulart (1961–64), and Lula da Silva (2003–10) in Brazil, and Luis Echeverría (1970–76) and Manuel López Obrador (2018–) in Mexico.

Classical Latin American populism undergoes four phases.<sup>8</sup> During the initial phase, e.g., first decade of Puntofijismo, real wages and demand increase, while strict price controls and the prevention of shortages of subsidized imports suffocate inflation. After this phase, real wages continue to rise, but the strong domestic demand and subsidies on wage goods generate a foreign exchange constraint. During the third phase, e.g., Chavismo with Chávez, shortages and strict controls become a real threat to stability, real wages and private investments start to decline, and fiscal indiscipline deteriorates the deficit at an accelerated pace. During the final collapsing phase, e.g., Chavismo with Maduro, corruption becomes generalized, brain drain paves the way to a sudden burst of capital flight, and high inflation escalates into hyperinflation. Although Venezuela has a long history of populism, it has never reached the collapsing fourth phase. The Chavismo phenomenon, currently led by Nicolás Maduro, bears this shameful honor.

As predicted by the collapsing fourth phase, the institutional deficiencies in Venezuela generalized corruption at all levels of government. According to Transparency International, which is the global organization leading the fight against corruption, Venezuela’s corruption perception index (CPI) has worsened from a very low starting point of 26 in 1999 to 16 in 2019 (the CPI ranges from 0 to 100, with lower scores corresponding to worsening corruption ratings). Venezuela is considered the 173rd (of 180) most corrupt country. The “Control of Corruption” indicator by the World Bank Worldwide Governance Research Dataset, the “Ethics and Corruption” index of the Global Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum, and the “Freedom from Corruption” index

7. Kirk Hawkins, “Populism in Venezuela: The Rise of Chavismo,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1137.

8. Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, “The Macroeconomics of Populism,” in *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 11–12.

by the Heritage Foundation corroborate that corruption in Venezuela has severely worsened since the Chavismo populist movement took office two decades ago.

If rampant corruption were not enough, in December 2016, Venezuela became the eighth Latin American economy to meet the criteria required to qualify for hyperinflation (i.e., monthly inflation rate exceeding 50 percent per month for thirty consecutive days), in addition to Chile (1973), Bolivia (1984), Nicaragua (1986), Argentina (1989), Brazil (1989), and Peru (1988 and 1990).<sup>9</sup> How did this happen? Monetarists consider inflation to be a problem caused strictly by a surplus supply of money and excess demand for goods and services,<sup>10</sup> which is a typical trait of Latin American left-leaning expansionary populist administrations. Similarly, Keynesians argue that inflation is the consequence of three pressures in the economy: (1) demand-pull inflation that results from an increase in demand, such as extensive government spending; (2) cost-push inflation that results from a rise in production costs, such as higher minimum wages; and (3) built-in inflation that partly results from the vicious circle that is created by people's expectations concerning higher prices and by the inertia of high inflation in the recent past.<sup>11</sup> In all three types of Keynesian pressures, inflation is likely to increase with expansionary populist policies.

Venezuela's rampant corruption and increasing hyperinflation have been the historical culmination of a long-time development that includes not just Chavismo but also a history of populist movements in Latin America. Starting with Peronism in Argentina, these populist movements tend to share the following two economic policies: increasing public spending (including education and health) and emphasizing industrialization through import-substitution (ISI) policies (mainly by closing down the economy to international trade).<sup>12</sup> Left-leaning populist governments also

9. Steve H. Hanke and Charles Bushnell, "Venezuela Enters the Record Book: The 57th Entry in the Hanke-Krus World Hyperinflation Table," *Studies in Applied Economics* 69 (December 2016): 1–25.

10. Stephan Haggard, "Inflation and Stabilization," in *International Political Economy: Perspectives on Global Power and Wealth*, ed. Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 417–29.

11. Paul A. Samuelson and Robert M. Solow, "Analytical Aspects of Anti-Inflation Policy," *American Economic Review* 50, no. 2 (1960): 177–94.

12. Rafael M. Di Tella and Ingrid Vogel, "Argentine Paradox: Economic Growth and the Populist Tradition," *Harvard Business Publishing*, no. 702001 (2001), pp. 1–24.

tend to encourage labor activism, nationalize private enterprises and natural resources, execute land reforms aimed at dismantling large latifundios, and increase the military apparatus.

Latin American populist movements further share some distinctive social policies, including the presence of a charismatic leader, the demagogic discourse of the people versus the elite, the empowerment of the marginalized sectors of society (mainly by increasing communal power), and encouraging national patriotism. National pride or patriotism is a combination of different factors and feelings (including cultural, ethnic, political, and historical issues) related to an individual's homeland, e.g., the Bolivarian heritage.

### ***Bolivarian Ideology in Chavismo***

Chávez captivated the poor and the excluded with the Bolivarian ideology. In his presidential inaugural speeches, Chávez used the word “Bolívar” 27 times in 1999, 22 times in 2000, and 38 times in 2007; Chávez did not present his 2013 inauguration speech due to cancer. Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) was the most prominent hero of Latin America's independence from Spain. At only forty-seven years of age, Bolívar fought 472 battles but was defeated only six times. He rode greater distances than those sailed by Columbus and Vasco da Gama combined, and he traveled three times farther than Napoleon and twice as far as Alexander the Great. Bolívar freed six nations, was the head of state of five of these nations, and carried the torch of liberty for a linear distance of approximately half the circumference of the earth. His ideas regarding liberty were written in 92 proclamations and 2,632 letters. The armies he commanded never conquered and only liberated.<sup>13</sup>

The Chavistas interpretation of Bolivarianism mainly refers to Bolívar's unstoppable quest for freedom and liberty from imperial domination.<sup>14</sup> In addition to Bolívar, free-thinker Simón Rodríguez and nineteenth-century icon Ezequiel Zamora further inspire the Chavismo spirit. As an admirer of Holbach and Rousseau,<sup>15</sup> Rodríguez championed the education of the masses and advocated strongly for placing sovereignty

13. With these headlines, Bolívar was selected as the most important nineteenth-century American, according to the BBC.

14. John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2006).

15. Emil Ludwig, *Bolívar: The Life of an Idealist* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1942).

in the hands of the people,<sup>16</sup> whereas Zamora fought for social justice and the unity of the peasants and the army.<sup>17</sup>

One distinctive Bolivarian principle that has lost steam in recent years is Bolívar's dream to unite the newly liberated territories. Far ahead of his time, Bolívar had the grandiose notion to unite Latin America under a common government linking all states in a confederation as a necessary counterweight to the growing power of the United States.<sup>18</sup> Regrettably, Bolívar lived to see his dream disintegrate when the short-lived nation known as "Gran Colombia" was dissolved into Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Guyana, and some territories of Peru, Brazil, and Nicaragua. Nearly two centuries after the dismantling of Gran Colombia, Bolívar's dream had a short and slim opportunity to become a reality when the moderate (MERCOSUR) and radical (ALBA) leftists in Latin America initiated talks of integration. The Southern Common Market (or MERCOSUR in Spanish) was founded by Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Its neighboring counterpart is ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). At its peak, ALBA comprised Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Honduras before the 2009 coup d'état.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the relative weaknesses of the ALBA bloc with respect to economics, the motives and principles underlying ALBA are important aspects of Chávez's legacy in terms of integration and crucial components of the overall Bolivarian project.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Latin American Political Matrix***

According to the political matrix shown in Table 1, government performance in Latin America can be judged based on the following two

16. Gerhard Masur, *Simón Bolívar* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1960).

17. Pedro Sanoja, "Ideology, Institutions and Ideas: Explaining Political Change in Venezuela," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 3 (2009): 405.

18. Julia Buxton, "Venezuela's Contemporary Political Crisis in Historical Context," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 24, no. 3 (2005): 340.

19. ALBA differs from MERCOSUR or any typical regional trade arrangement known thus far because it is based on barter rather than free trade. Each country provides goods or services according to its means and receives them according to its needs. For example, ALBA's two founding countries, Venezuela and Cuba, exchanged oil for expertise in education and public health in accordance with their respective social wants and needs.

20. Ken Cole, "Jazz in the Time of Globalisation: The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2010): 324.

perspectives: socioeconomic standards and political criteria, i.e., social prioritization or pragmatic decision-making and radical democracy or liberal democracy, respectively. Extending the political matrix into a political spectrum results in two extremes, i.e., “populist socialism” in the far left and “Washington consensus” in the far right, and two mixed models converging toward the center, i.e., “social democracy” and “pragmatic populism.”

**Table 1.** Latin American Political Matrix

		SOCIOECONOMIC STANDARDS	
		Social Prioritization	Pragmatic Decision-Making
POLITICAL CRITERIA	Liberal Democracy	Social Democracy (e.g., Mujica in Uruguay)	Washington Consensus <sup>21</sup> (e.g., Piñera in Chile)
	Radical Democracy	Populist Socialism <sup>22</sup> (e.g., Maduro in Venezuela)	Pragmatic Populism <sup>23</sup> (e.g., Bolsonaro in Brazil)

On the one side, social prioritization encourages worker management schemes in state-owned enterprises, as exemplified by the “empresas mixtas” (mixed enterprises) in the Venezuela Chavista. By contrast, pragmatic

21. Francisco Panizza defines the “Washington consensus” as “the free-market policies and structural reforms sponsored by Washington-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.” The consensus required governments to comply with the following three loan-related conditions: (1) to repay international creditors and reduce fiscal deficits by restricting public spending; (2) to attract private investment by moderating taxes; and (3) to encourage international trade by liberating interests and exchange rates. Francisco Panizza, “Unarmed Utopia Revisited: The Resurgence of Left-Of-Centre Politics in Latin America,” *Political Studies* 53, no. 4 (2005): 721–22.

22. The term “populist socialism” is a concerted mix of words between the government’s wishful model grounded on grassroots socialism self-defined as “twenty-first-century socialism” and “authoritarian populism” (the perception of the current model by Chavismo’s critics).

23. In reference to John Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism and populism, which according to Paul Piccone’s seminal analysis of postmodern populism share a common origin, the same tradition, and a similar vision. Paul Piccone, “Postmodern Populism,” *Telos* 103 (Spring 1995): 43–86.

decision-making primarily pursues production efficiency by opening the economy to global competition through free trade agreements, e.g., the “Chicago Boys” economic model in Chile over the past several decades. One way to understand the Latin American debate between social prioritization against pragmatic decision-making is to look at it from the perspective of the debate between “the welfare state [and] the free marketers who seek to limit state influence on the economy.”<sup>24</sup>

On the other side of the matrix, liberal democracy employs corporatist mechanisms to emphasize an institutionalized system of checks and balances designed to avoid the abuse of power.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to liberal democracy, in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, radical democracy draws upon the grassroots democratic tradition to emphasize the notion of popular sovereignty in which the desires of the people have primacy over the rights of the individual.<sup>26</sup> Radical democracy exploits a strong executive branch to empower community organizations with democratic influence in policy-making processes, e.g., Venezuela’s community councils.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, when judged by the standards associated with social prioritization and the radical democracy criteria, Chavismo fares much better.<sup>28</sup> However, when judged by the criteria of liberal democracy and by the standards of pragmatic decision-making, Chavismo fails miserably. In the case of Venezuela, the combination of popular sovereignty embraced by radical democracy and the welfare state instead of free marketers ignored the institutional mechanisms that are designed to protect minority rights under liberal democracy. These resulting institutional deficiencies hampered the smooth functioning of the community councils, cooperatives, and educational missions underpinning social prioritization.<sup>29</sup>

24. David Pan, “Economy and Ecology: Federal Populism and the Devil in the Details of Universal Basic Income,” *Telos* 191 (Summer 2020): 144.

25. Steve Ellner, “Venezuela’s Social-Based Democratic Model: Innovations and Limitations,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 43, no. 3 (2011): 421–49.

26. Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16.

27. Steve Ellner, “Hugo Chávez’s First Decade in Office: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings,” *Latin American Perspectives* 37, no. 1 (2010): 77–96.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

29. Antonio Lecuna, “From Chavismo to a Democratic Left in Venezuela,” *Dissent* 60, no. 3 (2013): 27–29.



### *What Can Be Done?*

It takes longer to build strong institutions and the infrastructure of service delivery than it takes to destroy them. Even if an economic and institutional turnaround could be achieved, the results would not be felt in time to stave off the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. However, there is a nonobvious but effective alternative that would take advantage of the relatively fast response times of international markets in delivering goods and services. That solution is a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) program. A BIG program represents a more efficient instrument to transfer oil profits directly to the desperate poor.

A BIG program is even morally justifiable. Following the Lockean proviso, and echoing the argument of American revolutionary hero Thomas Paine,<sup>30</sup> natural resources should be used for the benefit of all people, not just a privileged few.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the “moral claim for a BIG as a form of reparation requires not merely that an injustice has occurred but also that the injustice led to material deprivation for one’s descendants.”<sup>32</sup> This implies that under normal circumstances changing the status quo could get in the way of natural progress; but immediate and bold democratic measures (including a universal basic income) are required in extremely desperate times. Venezuela of the twenty-first century is one of those desperate cases in history. A survey by the country’s top universities (Católica Andrés Bello, Central de Venezuela, and Simón Bolívar) reports that eight out of ten people in Venezuela are living in poverty.<sup>33</sup>

An annual dividend payment from the Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company (Petróleos de Venezuela SA, or PDVSA) is financially feasible in the long run. Venezuela is home to the world’s largest proven crude oil reserves, with over 300 billion barrels (approximately 18 percent of the world’s total reserves).<sup>34</sup> Venezuela is also home to the

30. Thomas Paine, “Agrarian Justice (pamphlet),” available at [www.thomas-paine-friends.org/paine-thomas\\_agrarian-justice-1795-01.html](http://www.thomas-paine-friends.org/paine-thomas_agrarian-justice-1795-01.html).

31. Matt Zwolinski, “Property Rights, Coercion, and the Welfare State: The Libertarian Case for a Basic Income for All,” *Independent Review* 19, no. 4 (2015): 519.

32. David R. Henderson, “A Philosophical Economist’s Case against a Government-Guaranteed Basic Income,” *Independent Review* 19, no. 4 (2015): 497.

33. Vivian Sequera, “Venezuelans Report Big Weight Losses in 2017 as Hunger Hits,” *Reuters*, February 21, 2018, [www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-food/venezuelans-report-big-weight-losses-in-2017-as-hunger-hits-idUSKCN1G52HA](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-food/venezuelans-report-big-weight-losses-in-2017-as-hunger-hits-idUSKCN1G52HA).

34. Next on the list are Saudi Arabia with over 265 billion barrels and Canada with nearly 170 billion barrels, and then Iran and Iraq with approximately 150 billion

eighth largest proven natural gas reserve. This implies that the case for a BIG in Venezuela does not require a massive tax-and-transfer system, which could send the wrong message that “lazy surfers” are living off the hard work of others. Of course, some people will waste their dividends by gambling and other vices. However, most people will invest their PDVSA check in pension funds, start a business, pay medical insurance, make mortgage payments, or repay a student loan. According to an impact evaluation of unconditional cash transfers study in a sample of poor households in western Kenya, the treatment households increased both consumption and savings, but not spending on temptation goods.<sup>35</sup>

Because a universal basic income provides “to all segments of the population the kind of freedom to follow one’s own path that is generally reserved for the wealthy,” federal populism (the transfer of sovereignty to the individual with the replacement of federal programs with a universal basic income) could ultimately represent an important step in the pursuit of liberty and happiness.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the happiness factor, which should be the main goal of any nation, a BIG program would increase the spending power of urban slums, which in turn creates the basis for the survival of community life.<sup>37</sup>

The most important BIG condition in Venezuela is that only free (unincarcerated) citizens who are twenty years of age or older and who reside in Venezuela are entitled to the PDVSA dividend. The “resident” condition could reverse the brain-drain phenomenon and encourage the partial repatriation of highly educated young Venezuelans (along with some of their money), who fled the country to escape a dead-end future. Admittedly, this condition will also encourage fraudulent claims of fake citizens who are allegedly residing in Venezuela, but this effect appears to be only marginal. In addition to the residency condition, for an effective implementation of a BIG program in Venezuela the dividend payment would

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barrels each. See Samuel Stebbins, “These 15 Countries, as Home to Largest Reserves, Control the World’s Oil,” *USA Today*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/05/22/largest-oil-reserves-in-world-15-countries-that-control-the-worlds-oil/39497945/>.

35. Johannes Haushofer and Jeremy Shapiro, “The Short-Term Impact of Unconditional Cash Transfers to the Poor: Experimental Evidence from Kenya,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 4 (2016): 1973–2042.

36. Pan, “Economy and Ecology,” p. 152.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

represent a direct substitute to PDVSA's current anti-poverty contributions, not a supplement to them.

Finally, it would also be necessary to slightly increase the tax rate on the rich and establish a high-income threshold to slowly begin phasing out the PDVSA dividend, which should decrease the incentives to avoid or hide work because any income up to the high threshold represents an additional gain to the universal basic income.<sup>38</sup> Equally important and parallel to the above-mentioned conditions, the highly corrupt monetary system would need to be replaced by an institutionalized dollarization program. Ecuador and Panama are two examples in which a dollarization program has worked as an institutional shield against populist policies (dollarization applies to any foreign currency used by any given country).

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Chavismo's principles are inspired by the writings and actions of Simón Bolívar (independence hero), Ezequiel Zamora (civil war leader), and Simón Rodríguez (Bolívar's tutor). Bolívar contributed to independence from imperial dominance and regional integration, Zamora fought for social justice and the unity of peasants with the army, and Rodríguez led the drive for educating the masses. The principles underlying the "holy trinity" of Chavismo appear promising on paper, but in reality Chavismo transformed Venezuela from a subsidized coalition that nearly privatized the oil industry to a radical populist socialism that has weakened formal institutions to the brink of civil war.

Structural reforms of the incentives and institutions of the Venezuelan economy, while necessary, will not go far enough or take effect quickly enough to stave off a humanitarian disaster. It will be necessary to include the aid of international markets, the only force capable of acting quickly enough to deliver the goods and services that Venezuelans so desperately need. The second part of the reform strategy will require some sort of BIG, a universal basic income delivered in cash to all citizens (not just the Chavistas).

The BIG program proposes an annual dividend payment in dollars from PDVSA (the petroleum monopoly) to every free Venezuelan resident who is aged twenty years or older. The PDVSA dividend alone could guarantee a basic livelihood for the most underprivileged members of society

38. Ibid., p. 155.

and should be sufficient to shift the power balance of oil revenues from the government to the “people.” The following question, in the midst of a political campaign, could be asked from either side: Who should spend the oil proceeds, the government or the people? The political rhetoric says that now Venezuelans are owners of state-owned industries.

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