

Separating the Chaff from the Wheat: An Exploration of Latin American Political Regimes

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Abstract: This article seeks to characterize the predominant political regimes in Latin America in the 21st century, their relative stability and endurance. It points out that even if the differences between them are less clear than in the 20th century, the main regimes are authoritarian (autocratic), more or less liberal democracies, and populism. It goes on arguing that in contrast to the 20th century, the role and presence of the military current authoritarian regimes is less direct, which may have created confusion. Of the three regimes, authoritarian are the more stable ones. Regarding liberal democracy, despite ups and downs, democracy has remained as the dominant regime in the region. As established in mainstream political science findings about the region, the sources of this continuity do not depend overall on the economy or social trends such as inequality or poverty levels but on political factors (the normative preferences of political actors over democracy, and on their political moderation or radicalism). Also, Latin American democracies have weathered several storms of widespread protests deriving from inner discontent. In order to make sense of the sources of instability one has to look into strictly political factors such as fragmentation, volatility, acute polarization, coalition breakdowns, rejection of critical government policies, and impeachment of presidents. The third regime type is populism, which has had a strong revival during this century, with important differences with its earlier 20th century versions. Several scholarly works point out that present populist regimes' most prominent features are strictly political, which they characterize as a "moment" or a movement to attain power, which may end up giving birth to more stable regimes like competitive authoritarianism. I prefer to delve into populism as a regime in its own right, which has emerged frequently in the region, in some cases deriving into fully authoritarian ones (Venezuela) or moving back to liberal democracy (Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru). The paper ends calling for the need to deepen research regarding both differences between the three regimes and the specific factors affecting stability of democracies in the region.

Keywords: Latin American Politics, Comparative Politics, Democracy, Authoritarian Regimes, Populism

1. Introduction

The 21st century brought in its midst strong political instability worldwide. The Third Wave of Democratization beginning in the 1970s raised high expectations about the world advancing toward more open societies where the rule of law and human rights would be respected. During those early days, the spread of democracy in Latin America was perhaps the most consistent and swift of all. It began in 1978 with the Dominican Republic and spread rapidly southward. By the 1990s, all Latin American countries with the exception of Cuba had either initiated or were fully into the democratizing process. It was certainly a novelty because most of the 20th century had witnessed a whole gamut of military regimes in

the region, including the classic family-centered ones, like Trujillo in Dominican Republic and Somoza in Nicaragua, or the military juntas that mushroomed in South America during the Cold War, especially in the Southern Cone. Even leftward military regimes were established in Peru and Bolivia.

But the dream of a fully democratic continent was not to be easily achieved. Very soon some of the typical autocratic instincts that seemed ingrained in the region's DNA began to overshoot, producing a backlash that continues today. The first and most iconic case was that of Peru in the 1990s, where a barely known head of an agricultural college, Alberto Fujimori, entered the scene bringing about a non-flamboyant version of the populist "no matter what, I'll solve this" rhetoric. Because during his tenure he addressed very

successfully the two major problems Peru was facing at the time—hyperinflation and Shining Path, the deadly extreme-left guerrilla—he was able to capture the imagination (and a relief in the pockets) of most Peruvians. But when other powers like Congress and the courts became obstacles to his steadfast style, he shut down Congress and initiated a growingly autocratic rule until a corruption scandal in his inner circle forced him to flee the country. [1] Later, by the turn of the century, the autocratic impulse was reinforced by the emergence of Hugo Chavez, who brought about a full revival of the populist tradition. [2] Ever since, Latin America has been struggling with growing political instability, mostly by presidents who manipulate the system to defy the rule of law, acquire more powers and become less accountable.

This article makes an exploration into how political order in 21st century Latin America has been elusive, even after a new era of relative economic stability ensued at the end of the 20th century. Here the role of the three main contemporary types of political regime (liberal democracies, full authoritarian regimes, and populism) in the region and their relative levels of stability is examined. In contrast with other interpretations, it is argued that populism has become a regime type in its own right and not just an outlier. Although the dividing lines between the three are more tenuous than in the past, there remain substantial differences affecting governance and stability.

2. Hard Core Authoritarianism

There are critical differences between the autocratic regimes of the 21st century and their counterparts of last century. In what has been characterized as a worldwide current trend of autocratization, [3] one first difference is that most countries do not become autocratic abruptly—neither through military coups nor by revolutions—as they did during the 20th century. Nowadays democratic regimes (many of them resulting from the Third Wave of Democratization) are eroded by the hand of rulers democratically elected who then launch a set of strategies to remain in power, becoming increasingly authoritarian along the way.

Secondly—closely related to the first—the role of the military in ruling the countries is less direct than in the past. In Latin America autocratization has taken place at the hands of both right and left leaders. Unlike last century where military dictatorships were mainly rightward oriented, in the 21st the latter predominates. But in any case, today the involvement of the military is not as direct as it was formerly. Whereas the classic Juntas of the past or the regimes revolving around a strongman almost always had the military in command, in the present century the role of the armed forces in politics is mainly indirect, moving to the rearguard if you will. That was the case in 2019 in Bolivia, when they pressured Evo Morales to resign or more recently in late 2022 Peru when the high command of the army failed to go along with the closure of Congress ordered by President Castillo, leading hours later to his impeachment, signaling perhaps the beginning of the unraveling of the political system. Two important exceptions

to the less active role of the military have been the 2009 Honduras crisis, where their intervention was very direct—by capturing President Zelaya and sending him into exile—and the Venezuelan case, where the military have become a main component of the civilian-military alliance brought about by Chavismo.

Currently the only open dictatorships in Latin America are Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua (Haiti being a special case of authoritarianism as a result of its failed state status). However, the nature of the latter two varies from that of Cuba or other equivalent regimes during the 20th century. More recently El Salvador has faced a plethora of actions by the hand of President Bukele bringing it closer to that pack. One example was the use of the armed forces in February 2020 to put pressure on Congress and in March 2023 declaring martial law and the ensuing persecution of dissenters. [4] Even if that was the case, it would be in the early stages. There remain, however, important distinctions between the three regimes. Cuba is the most singular one. It arose in the 20th century after a revolution, so it does not belong in the new wave of autocratization. It has a long and epic history, for which it is still a source of inspiration for the advance of authoritarian left-wing regimes in the region given the aura it enjoys as a bulwark against U.S. imperialism. Levitsky and Way have recently argued that autocratic regimes originating from revolutions tend to last longer than those deriving either from military coups or from democratic backsliding. The violent replacement of the *ancien regime*, including the institutional corpus and the military, has allowed for a more coherent leadership, pervasive repression, and control of civilian life through a strong ideology and state propaganda. [5] Cuba has proved this assert time and again. It bounced back after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to dramatic times in the island after Russia cut off all financial support and subsidies. These times, dubbed the “período especial” (Special Period) saw a drastic drop in economic growth, vast shortages of essential goods and increasing poverty. [6] Cuba recovered at the beginning of the new century thanks to Venezuela’s support, both through heavy oil subsidies and other advantageous deals. As Venezuela’s economy collapsed, preventing it to continue supporting the island, Cuba was able to survive thanks to a redefinition of relations between the two countries during the Obama administration. The warming of relations with the U.S. ceased in the Trump years, giving way to the worsening of the domestic economy, magnified by the pandemic, all of which brought about a wave of protests unseen since the times of the Período Especial. This time it seemed that the classic internal support the regime enjoyed for decades had vanished. [7] However, the combination of repression, mild changes and the cohesion of the Cuban elite has allowed the country to weather the storm.

Venezuela, in turn, can be considered the epitome of democratic backsliding in the region. The country evolved from Hugo Chavez’ bombastic populist reign into fuller authoritarian rule under Maduro, while always showing a remarkable survival capacity. Despite not originating from a classic revolution, as Levitsky & Way would argue, two

episodes in the confrontation between the Chavez government and its foes (an insurrection-like mobilization in the capital city that led to Chavez resigning and a devastating oil strike shortly after) helped to create a strong cohesion within the ruling Chavista elite, as well as disbanding and criminalizing any internal dissension within the government party. Chávez was not only able to build a new regime in one of the region's strategic spots but by using the financial power of windfall oil profits he attempted to reverse the influence of the U.S. in the region by promoting—with the support of other regional allies—the creation of several regional organizations where the U.S. was explicitly excluded. [8] The Maduro regime emerging after the death of Chavez in 2013 has shown great resilience even after economic collapse, deep humanitarian challenges, [9] international isolation, and a quasi-unanimous depiction of the regime as a perpetrator of crimes against humanity. [10] Despite cyclical protests and surviving on the shoulders of a minority—small but very active—the current regime has been very apt in managing an enduring stability. [11]

Nicaragua is at a half distance between the other two. Though originating in the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, the emerging regime did not seek to destroy all institutions or eliminate the opposition mainly for two reasons. First, because the anti-Somoza coalition that brought down the regime included influential democratic forces that soon coalesced into an internal opposition. Secondly because at the time the prevailing environment in the region had become democracy and its promotion. In 1990 the Sandinistas were forced to abandon power as a result of an electoral defeat. After sixteen years of crossing the desert, in 2006 Daniel Ortega came back to power, [12] beginning slowly but steadily—just like Chavez before him—an erosion of the democratic institutions created during his absence from power. The Ortega regime has also shown great resilience. After several waves of massive protests in 2014 and again in 2018, it has been able to dismantle the opposition, disqualify any emerging leader and crush protests, while granting relative economic freedom.

3. (More or Less) Liberal Democracies

Taking the 1950s as a starting point, only three fully liberal democracies in the Americas remained so during the second half of the century. Here we follow the definition of democracy provided by Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán: “every regime that during a particular year met four characteristics: (1) the government was elected in free and fair elections; (2) there were good protections for civil liberties; (3) the electorate included most of the adult population; and (4) there was no encroachment of the military or other nonelected actors in the domain of elected powers”. [13] The countries in question were United States, Canada, and Costa Rica. Despite its shortcomings in human rights during and after the long civil war, Colombia has maintained a relatively democratic course. The 1990s reached the peak in the number of countries close to that definition. Since then, most have experienced some sort of

democratic backsliding in some of those parameters, except Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, Dominican Republic, and Colombia. In turn, Uruguay, Chile, and Venezuela, countries that during the 20th century enjoyed relative stability, saw their democratic regimes interrupted: during the second half of the century in the first two and in Venezuela at some point in this century. After frequent dictatorships during the 20th century, since 1983 and after a turbulent restart, Argentina has managed to establish a quasi-liberal system. Overall, despite another episode of instability between 2001 and 2003, the basic constitutional democratic arrangements have been respected. One indication of the growing separation of powers was the handling of the trials of several heads of the armed forces, former heads of the military juntas and mid-level perpetrators regarding the “dirty war”. In two phases—before and after the elimination of amnesty laws and despite very strong political pressures—1,058 perpetrators were indicted in a total of 273 sentences. [14] At the end of the 1990s, several presidents in Ecuador saw their constitutional terms cut short by social and political upheaval. It is worth asking, then, where does the difficulty in laying the ground for a relatively stable political order come from?

There are specific historical reasons in each case (not to be considered here) but maintaining durable and clear presidential succession mechanisms over time—a golden rule of democracy—has become a crucial source of instability. Democracy in Latin America is essentially presidential and the countries in the region have struggled to define clear-cut terms in office. Many of them have veered toward reelection, its rules becoming highly contentious as they heighten political tension at a time when polarization has been the typical environment.

A crucial turning point for the worse in the region's democratic rule took place in Venezuela at the turn of the century. Until then Venezuela had been a bulwark against autocratic rule, using its economic influence both to isolate dictatorships and to promote transitions to democracy, as was the case of the Contadora Group, created alongside Colombia, Mexico, and Panama. [15] After 1958 the country enjoyed forty years of democracy. In the eyes of most observers, both domestic and external it was a strong candidate for long term stability. But in 1999 it took an abrupt turn. After Hugo was elected began a slow democratic breakdown, drifting after his death in 2013 towards open autocratic rule. One trend Chávez initiated, attempted unsuccessfully later by several countries, was the establishment of indefinite reelection. As a result, political alternation was thrown overboard due to the extreme strengthening of executive power, leading to the weakening of both Congress and the rule of law, permanent attacks on press freedom, the creation of a climate of impunity and the violation of the rights of minorities.

The number of actual democracies in the region is a matter of dispute. For some analysts, countries like Guatemala, Bolivia, Honduras, and Paraguay, and even Ecuador, [16] are hybrid regimes. According to the definition mentioned above they would classify as democracies, no matter how weak.

3.1. The Growing Discontent with Democracy

Shortly after the Latam third wave of democratization started it began to show important disturbances. Though some may have originated from economic crises (Peru in the 1980s, Venezuela in the 1990s) or long accumulated grievances, such as inequality, most economic troubles did not spark regime change. One pervasive trend has been the "revolution of expectations." Paradoxically, rising living conditions led to wide streets protests in several countries. Notoriously in Brazil and Chile large social sectors reacted to the improvement of social conditions as insufficient or launched massive mobilizations against blatant corruption, especially in the former, or the cost of public services and education in the latter. In both countries dissatisfaction became widespread despite enjoying the highest rates of growth in the region and increasing income per person. Massive protests also occurred in Ecuador and Haiti and more recently in Panama, each for specific reasons. [17] Since 2020 the impact of the global pandemic has disrupted the normal communication and trust between elected leaders and a population in disbelief. Covid-19 has moved the pendulum either to the left or to the right. But neither one has led to the breakdown of democracy (or to the collapse of authoritarian regimes for that matter).

There are many different interpretations for this sustained instability. Some scholars have addressed what could be called structural factors. In the late 1960s, Huntington argued that the lack of political order was due to the mismatch between the relatively rapid economic and social modernization and the countries' slower political development. [18] Following a famous analogy from economics about price and wage increases, economic and social modernization had advanced by the elevator while political and institutional development took the stairs. This interpretation may have been adequate for a good part of the 20th century (albeit to a lesser degree during the Cold War, when US interventionism contributed to thwarting democratic development), but by the end of the century and into the present, conditions have changed, especially the institutional maturity democracy has achieved in many countries during the Third Wave.

More recently Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán have concluded that the level of economic development in the medium term has not impinged directly on the chances of democratic survival in Latin America. By the same token, short-term economic performance does not affect the survival of competitive regimes, as Argentina has demonstrated once and again. Instead, they argue, it is necessary to focus on the regional political environment, on the normative preferences of political actors over democracy, and on their political moderation or radicalism. [19] According to these authors, democracies are more likely to survive when political actors have strong normative preferences for a regime of liberties and when they show moderation in their policy options. They argue that during a good part of the 20th century both actors leaning to the right like the military, the business elites and many political leaders were ready to sacrifice democracy on the altar of their own specific interests. The same was true for

actors in the left in most countries for whom revolution and the creation of more just societies were more important than the survival of any democratic experiment. By the same token, empirical evidence also shows that democratic regimes are less vulnerable to breakdown when the regional political environment supports democratic values, which has been mostly true during the Third Wave.

3.2. Political Factors *Sensu Strictu*

Another angle to look at the instability of democracy is to dig into the political factors themselves, even if they don't involve the demise of the system. In this section I describe some of these factors, how they influence the way democratic regimes perform and how such factors can turn them more fragile, in some cases operating as destabilizing forces. These include both long and medium term as well as short term political mechanisms that operate in contemporary democratic regimes. They do not represent an exhaustive list, just an exploratory one. The factors suggested here (fragmentation, volatility, polarization, coalition breakdown, rejection of government measures, and impeachment of presidents) have been those impacting more strongly most countries during the Third Wave. They involve different realms of political life, namely the composition of the political stage, the character of daily life confrontation, the ability of the dominant parties or social forces to maintain their cohesion, the mood of the country vis-à-vis government's decisions, and the relative strength of a president to stay in power when politically isolated. Let us look at them summarily.

Fragmentation is the extent to which the spread of political parties participating in the contest for power in each country is wide or narrow. The greater the number of political parties and the dispersion of the vote (i.e., the more fragmented) the more fragile the political regime. As Richard Pildes has put it, "when political authority—the power to make and influence public decisions and policy—is dispersed into so many different hands and power centers both inside and outside the state, it becomes difficult to marshal and sustain the necessary political power for governments to function effectively". [20] Fragmentation varies widely in the region. It has become a trademark of Peruvian politics; in 2016 Congress counted with only six parties, which augmented to nine in 2020 and ten in 2021. In the first round of the last presidential election the number of registered candidates shot up to 18 from 18 different parties. [21] Even in Colombia, which enjoyed near to a century of two-party politics, [22] it has become an increasingly influential factor after the collapse of the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties.

Volatility, in turn, refers to the duration (computed in terms of number of votes) of political parties and the extent to which they remain or disappear from the political scene. Party politics in the 20th century democracies was characterized by a great durability and by a more defined ideological format, which brought about greater stability both in the number (less fragmentation) and duration (less volatility) of political parties. After WWII the division between social democrats (or socialists) and Christian democrats in Europe is a case in point.

But perhaps the division between Labor and Conservatives in Britain, as well as that between Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. are the most classic of all. Mainwaring and Su have shown how presidential volatility increased during and after the 1990s, with an upward trend after 2000. [23] Volatility has become a typical trend in Chile, where the classic post-Pinochet alternance between rightwing and leftwing parties endured until the last elections. Now it would seem that the political dominance is increasingly up for grabs. The same could be said about Mexico, where the emergence of Lopez Obrador and his newly founded party Morena has induced the demise of the traditional PRI, PAN, and PRD, or the ever-changing political landscape in Ecuador, especially after President Correa left the scene.

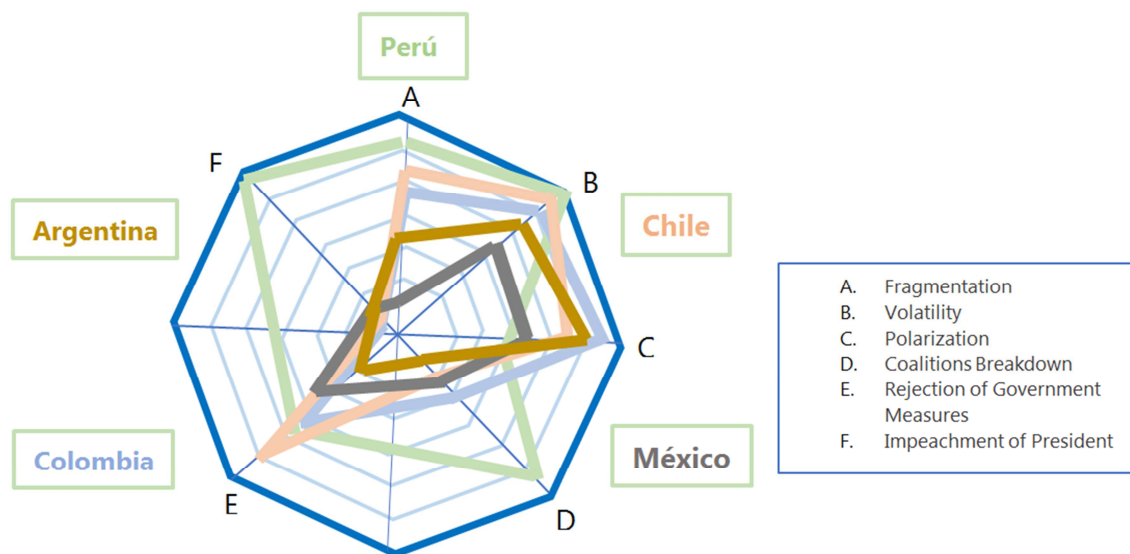
Polarization is perhaps the dominant feature of the 21st century's political trends. During last century it had a clear role as political strategy both during the emergence and throughout the duration of Italian fascism and German Nazism. It was also used on and off as a strategy of the communist parties throughout Europe, but it has been in the current century when polarization has spread almost universally. At the turn of the century in Latin America it became a brand of sorts under the influence of Chávez as the so-called pink tide of emerging left-wing regimes caught steam. But later it has become an indistinguishable part and parcel of right and left. The recent elections in Brazil showed increasing levels of political violence, associated with the tension and polarization of the electorate. [24]

As the name indicates, *coalition breakdowns* involve the rupture of political agreements holding governments together. They mostly involve political parties when the government party lacks a clear majority in Congress (in either one or two chambers) but they can also involve larger social and political coalitions, which may include labor unions, business, or other social organizations. One important example was the role

played by the Confederación de Organizaciones Indígenas (Confederation of Indigenous Organizations) in Ecuadorian politics at the turn of the century. Whenever any given government lost the actual or tacit support from the confederation, it had its days numbered. It may have also been the last nail in the coffin of President Castillo's recent demise in Peru. Even his closest allies rejected him (he was expelled from his own party) and after his impeachment by Congress, his appointed Vice-president took the reins of power. [25]

While the *rejection of government measures* is an ordinary occurrence of any political system, at times the rejection of specific decisions or proposals may involve a watershed in terms of the strength or relative fragility of a government. A recent example was the decision in 2022 by the short-lived British Conservative government of Liz Truss to propose a massive cut in taxes against all opinions in her own party and in the country in general. While those kinds of circumstances are not so frequent, the accumulation of rejections at a given period can have the same effect. The so-called "paquete" or package of macroeconomic measures by Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1989 or the 2022 rejection of the changes in the Chilean constitution, which was a trademark of newly installed president Boric, are examples of this.

Lastly, the *impeachment of the president* is the most extreme example of instability for a government. During the 20th century it was not a typical occurrence in Latin America's democratic regimes but being highly presidential in nature, after Nixon's impeachment it became the ultimate checkmate for the emerging democratic regimes in the region. The impeachment of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1993 sealed his final failure and prompted the worst political crisis that country had in its fifty years of democratic rule. At the turn of the century, it occurred several times in Ecuador and later in Peru it has become a highly frequent occurrence, leading in the latter country to the unraveling of the political system.



Source: Author's¹

Figure 1. Sources of Political Instability.

¹The purpose of the figure is strictly illustrative. It entails no real measurement of the different factors.

The above figure illustrates the working of these factors and how they impinge upon several Latin American countries.

4. Populism

Populism has a long history in Latin America. It was on and off present during the 20th century and has had a stark comeback in the current one. Characterizing populism, however, has been ambiguous because not all the factors present in its earlier form have repeated in our time. Last century most interpretations of populism were a combo of economic, social, and political factors, at times including them as part of an equation toward modernization, where populism was a means toward incorporating into political life emerging social segments until then disenfranchised,[26] or incarnating usually through a messianic leader a path for the emancipation of the wretched of the earth. But one crucial factor stood at the center of that characterization: most of the political movements involved were left-oriented.

In the 21st century the situation has been far more complex, especially after the Fujimori experience in Peru in the 90s. With the ascent of Chávez and other left-wing leaders following his path, the most common interpretation of populism has been that of a hybrid regime. Such hybrid regimes mushroomed in those years but to most scholars they lacked enough entity to stand as regimes in their own right. The most robust of such interpretations was that of competitive authoritarianism, which included regimes as that of Chávez, Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia as part and parcel of trend of hybrid regimes where main tenets of democratic rule were receding, giving way to greater authoritarian rule. [27] However, the persistence over the years in the region of political events similar to past populist experiences and their abrupt inroads in Europe (mainly Poland and Hungary, but earlier in Spain with Podemos and in Britain, behind the push for Brexit) and later in the U.S. with Donald Trump, has brought about a growing interest to depict populism's specificity. For Carlos de la Torre, a specialist in the Latin American populist tradition, "Populist rhetoric assembles all social, economic, cultural, and ethnic differentiation and oppression into two irreconcilable poles: the people versus the oligarchy. The notion of "the people" incorporates the idea of antagonistic conflict between two groups, with a romantic view of the purity of the people. As a result, "the people" of populism has been imagined as an undifferentiated, unified, fixed, and homogenous entity." [28]

Another pioneering effort is that of Kurt Weyland. Weyland wrote a seminal article where he compared populist experiences of both centuries, leading him to interpret them as distinct political strategies and not a combination of many factors. [29] Different to the interpretations of Latin American populism as a mixture of social, economic, and political factors, Weyland argues that it should be understood in strictly political terms as a specific political arrangement to gain—and maintain—power. In doing so he seems to underscore the preeminence of ideology in the making of populist leaders.

In an extensive work, Levitsky and Loxton examined 14 cases of populism in the Andean region during both centuries, concluding that populism was a transitory stage, brought about by different situations that eventually led to competitive authoritarian regimes. In their view, populism is more a sparkling moment (led by very characteristic and personalistic leaders) that is conducive to the erosion of democracy and prepares the ground for more 'stable' competitive authoritarian systems. Despite the wide coverage of countries and populist leaders, they measured populism "...only during politicians' ascent to power, that is, before they took office. Presidents' subsequent behaviour, which is closely related to regime outcomes, has no bearing on whether they are classified as populist." [30] Following that line of thought the populist phenomena are stretched too thin, eluding the governmental behavior and strategies that are decisive in characterizing the new political conditions and workings brought about by populism.

The view sustained here is that populism enjoys more consistency, not only as a movement toward attaining power, as de la Torre, Weyland and Levitsky and Loxton describe it, but as regimes in their own right. They tend to be short-lived, among other reasons because they depend too directly on the personalistic rule of the leaders, or because their obsessive way of handling power tends to isolate them and weaken their hold of it, as was the case with Donald Trump. On some occasions their rule may bring about full authoritarian regimes, like happened when Chávez—the ultimate charismatic leader—passed away, giving way to Nicolás Maduro's repressive rule while on others they prompt a return to democracy. The return to democracy in Ecuador precisely occurred when Correa left power after 2017 in the hands of his second-in-command, Lenin Moreno, who confronted his former boss and eliminated indefinite reelection, opening the way to normal power alternation. [31]

A new breed of populist caudillos both from the left and the right has become a new normal in the ruling of Latin American countries in the 21st century. [32] To an important extent the emergence of this trend is linked to the wider phenomenon of autocratization described in the first section. In the way they rule some of the features—directly related to the competitive authoritarian style of governing—remain but are not identical to it. In fact, it can revert to full democratic rule if the caudillo abandons power. Ecuador after Correa, Bolivia after Evo Morales, and Argentina after the Kirchners are good examples, as may occur now that Bolsonaro was defeated in his attempt at reelection in Brazil. Despite looking only like transitory regimes, the populist experiences have become part and parcel of the way of making politics in the region (and elsewhere), arising where no one would anticipate their occurrence, as was partially the case with Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, who contributed to the fading away of the long lasting traditional liberal and conservative parties. More recently this has also occurred in El Salvador, though with a stronger blast, given the weaker institutions of the country.

In any case, the main argument is that populism seems to be

the main type of hybrid regime emerging in Latin America, as well as in Europe. In that regard Pierre Rosanvallon [33] has identified several features to make sense of populism, namely:

The role of the leader. Though movements with no clear leaders may occur (e.g., the Yellow Vests in France), populism generally originates around a charismatic leader. Perón in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil were prominent 20th century populists. In the 21st the most emblematic have been Chávez and Evo Morales in Venezuela and Bolivia, respectively. While both were leftists, Uribe in Colombia, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Bukele in El Salvador represent a new breed of right-wing populists. A case of moderate populism is Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. He could not revert the long-lasting Mexican tradition against reelection so after his successor is elected, though most probably coming from the ranks of his party, Morena, it is likely that he (or she) will come back to a more institutional path consistent with the new democratic tradition established in Mexico since the beginning of the century.

Induced polarization between friends and enemies. An essential element of the dynamics of populism is the stark division between the leader and that part of the nation opposing him, or between the people and its enemies, or the people Vs. the oligarchy. What this means is that polarization under populism acquires a distinctive logic. In all cases, left and right, the leader adjudicates him or herself to be the true incarnation of the will of the people, which prompts them to strengthen their presidential powers at the expense of the legislature or the courts.

A regime of passions and emotions. Typical of the era we live in, where the rational and institutional anchors of politics have starkly eroded, in populism the handling of emotions prevails over rationality, both in rhetoric and arguments. In consequence, policies matter less than permanent symbolic mobilization. This element has been largely favored by the impact social media has attained in the making and diffusion of political arguments.

The economy is always political. Although populism has sometimes been used as a deprecating brand when applied to economic policies, in populism economic actions (sometimes extreme) are aimed at attacking opponents or to glorify the leader.

Populism is difficult to combat because, contrary to mainstream arguments, it does not involve the outright rejection of electoral democracy. It also thrives in the highly polarized environment that prevails worldwide, building on the electoral component of democracy rule to expand its influence mostly through presidential power.

Regarding the factors depicted above regarding democracy's instability (and subject to further substantiation), one could hypothesize that both the polarized political climate and fragmentation are clearly favorable conditions for the emergence of populist regimes but not necessarily the second regarding their continuity. To a lesser extent the same could be said about volatility. Clearly policy rejection and impeachment are as negative for the survival of populism as they are for democratic regimes.

5. Conclusions

21st century Latin America has three distinguishable types of political regimes: fully authoritarian, more or less liberal democracies, and populism. In contrast to the 20th century, the differences between the three are less stark, except for Cuba, the only of the four authoritarian regimes (Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti) to emerge from a revolution and which remains as one of the few totalitarian regimes worldwide. Another important distinction is that the role of the military in the making of authoritarian regimes is less prominent than in the past. Of the three types of regimes authoritarian ones have been the most stable and enduring, despite cyclical domestic social unrest and enormous pressures from the outside, mainly financial, commercial sanctions or personal sanctions targeting their leaders on the part of the U.S., the European Union or both.

Populism is the less stable and most fluid of the three. It can mutate into either of the other two when its main tenets break down—death or exit from the scene of the leader, weakening of the coalitions making it possible, or crossing extreme constitutional limits. In Latin America populism has led either to the establishment of more openly autocratic regimes (Venezuela, Bolivia under Evo Morales, El Salvador) or to a return to more liberal democracies (Bolivia after Evo Morales, Ecuador, Peru). Different to other views depicting populism as a “moment” or as phase toward more stable regimes (i.e., competitive authoritarianism), populism is depicted here as a regime in its own right. Its most important features are: the role of the (generally charismatic) leader, polarization is based on the friend vs. enemy distinction, people are mobilized mainly on the basis of passions and emotions, and economic policies are to a great extent politically oriented. It has gained traction not only in Latin America but also in Europe and in the U.S.

Regarding their permanence, democratic regimes stand in the middle. Most democracies in the region have withstood continuous pressures, either from the economy and its social consequences, or from inner political factors. Their high rate of survival doesn't mean that democracies are not prone to instability. There is a good number of intrinsically political factors playing in that regard: fragmentation, volatility, polarization, coalition breakdown, rejection of critical government measures, and impeachment of presidents. The attempt made here to characterize the different factors requires further research to establish adequate measurement as well as comparing their relative impact in destabilizing democratic regimes. There is also need for additional comparative research between the three systems and their recent evolution in Latin America.

Despite the abrupt changes towards populism or autocracy, there is a systemic preference towards democracy in the region. It has allowed democracies to cope with extreme economic instability, like Argentina has suffered for decades, the extreme political fragmentation of Peru, or survival against corruption in some Central American nations. Despite the current weakness of the inter-American system, especially

the OAS, democracy remains dominant, despite variations on how to make it possible.

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