

The Populist Threat to Democracy

THE SURPRISING ADVANCE OF POPULISM

Populism has disturbed and disrupted democracies for decades, in various areas of the world. But for much of this time, it was seen as a transitional or residual problem that would soon pass. In the region most affected by populism – Latin America – various personalistic plebiscitarian leaders had won government power since the 1930s and had enacted substantial socioeconomic and political transformations.¹ Yet observers regarded this upsurge of populism in the mid-twentieth century as a transitional stage of development. Newly mobilized mass groupings were falling for charismatic *caudillos*, but these irresponsible, unaccountable presidents would soon disappoint people's excessive hopes. As the citizenry learned from these bad experiences, populism would quickly lose appeal; advancing modernization would bring democratic maturation (Germani 1978).

By contrast to Latin America, where personalistic plebiscitarian leaders managed to win majority support, in Europe populism emerged as a fringe phenomenon. Diehard movements hailing from the radical right long remained marginal and looked like a moribund remnant of resentful nostalgia tinged with paleo-fascism, which generational replacement, ongoing post-modernization, and liberal value change would surely eliminate. For these reasons, early observers saw the different regional versions of populism as a temporary problem or a limited nuisance, rather than a serious threat to democracy. Developmental progress, political learning, and democratic institution building would sooner or later contain and overcome its political fallout and forestall or limit any damage to liberal pluralism.

¹ For stylistic reasons, I use “personalistic plebiscitarian leadership” interchangeably with the term populism. Later, I explain this notion, which is central to my political-strategic definition of populism.

Against all expectations, however, populism refused to disappear. In Latin America, one wave of populism followed upon the other. After the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s had suppressed classical populism à la Juan Perón (1946–55) and Getúlio Vargas (1951–54), a new type of populism arose in the restored democracies of the 1980s and 1990s. Interestingly, several of these leaders proved populism's typical adaptability by promoting market-oriented adjustment programs, which reversed the protectionist state interventionism spearheaded by their classical forebears (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996). Soon thereafter, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership took another surprising twist: Left-wing populists came to contest this turn to neoliberalism and won massive support with a return to state interventionism in the early 2000s (Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010; Levitsky and Roberts 2011). Continuing this dizzying slalom, in recent years a new, culturally conservative type of right-wing populist emerged (Kestler 2022), most prominently Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019–22) (Hunter and Power 2019).

Thus, while each version of populism did remain a temporary phenomenon, populism as a political strategy proved irrepressible and recurring; and through its rapid mutations, it demonstrated its adaptability, which boosted its chances of electoral success. With their skill in taking advantage of any opportunity and win power under variegated circumstances, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders became a frequent threat to democracy in Latin America. Just like Argentina's Perón had done in the 1940s and 1950s, neoliberal populist Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990–2000) as well as anti-neoliberal populist Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999–2013) suffocated democracy and imposed competitive-authoritarian regimes; and right-winger Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019–present) is pushing as hard for “eternal” self-perpetuation as left-winger Evo Morales (2006–19) did in Bolivia. In fact, with the normative delegitimation and international prohibition of military coups in Latin America, populism now constitutes the most serious danger to liberal pluralism in the region.

As populism defied expectations by continuing to haunt much of Latin America, it achieved an even more surprising feat in Europe by starting to win greater support and emerging from its extremist ghetto (Akkerman, De Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; more skeptical recently: Bartels 2023; chap. 6). Indeed, rejuvenated right-wingers or personalistic plebiscitarian leaders of a conservative orientation eventually managed to capture government power even in the highly developed, solidly democratic western half of the Old Continent, as in Italy after 1994 (Newell 2019) and Austria in 1999. In more and more countries, populism turned into a serious competitor, for instance by advancing to presidential runoff elections in France in 2002, 2017, and 2022. And in Eastern Europe, many new democracies that had embraced political liberalism with such enthusiasm in 1989 experienced a backlash that brought growing numbers of populists to power (Krastev and Holmes 2019; chap. 1). Shockingly, some of them squeezed or even suffocated democracy, most

strikingly and consequentially in the poster children of the post-communist transition: Poland and especially Hungary.

To achieve this increasing electoral success, Europe's populist movements and parties tried hard to leave their paleo- or neofascist origins behind. They recruited fresh, young leaders and employed more attractive appeals by raising new issues that mainstream parties did not want to touch, such as mass immigration, seen as a problem by substantial segments of the citizenry. In these ways, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders left marginality behind and put mainstream parties on the defensive, challenging their dominance of the electoral arena. By invoking and normalizing widespread fears and resentments, populist challengers induced some establishment formations to modify their own message, while drawing voters away from those parties that refused to undertake such opportunistic moves. With their unsavory yet savvy campaigns, illiberal, anti-pluralist leaders turned into effective contenders for chief executive office, threatening to undermine the quality of democracy, if not jeopardize its survival.

These risks became highly acute and salient in 2016 with the shocking Brexit referendum and the stunning electoral triumph of Donald Trump. If populist movements could achieve such unexpected success in two of the oldest, strongest democracies in the world, whose unshakable consolidation nobody had hitherto doubted, then a fundamental reassessment seemed to be in order. Had observers seriously underestimated the danger posed by populism? Democracy suddenly looked fragile and precarious.

After all, populist election victories raised the urgent question whether the "really existing" regimes of liberal pluralism were being weakened by oligarchic ossification, technocratic detachment, and the resulting representational deficits (Mounk 2018). How grave was their vulnerability to attack? Indeed, liberal democracy has an inherent weakness and potentially fatal flaw: Populist leaders who win government power can, in principle, exploit their electoral mandate and institutional attributions and resolutely concentrate power, distorting and perhaps asphyxiating democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Would headstrong Trump, for instance, bend or even break the USA's corroded checks and balances, impose his will while disrespecting judicial constraints, and use all kinds of tricks to engineer a reelection victory? Would US democracy, already hollowed out by deepening political and affective polarization, totter or even crumble under the brash populist's energetic assault (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018; Mettler and Lieberman 2020; Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2022)?

POPULISM'S INHERENT THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

The advance of populism in Latin America and Europe during the early twenty-first century, which helped to feed a global wave of populism that reached Asia as well (Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009; Kenny 2018), was problematic and

worrisome because populism by nature stands in tension with liberal pluralism and democracy (Urbinati 2019; Sadurski 2022; Issacharoff 2023). This danger arises from the core of populism, namely personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, which is anti-institutional, polarizing, and confrontational. This book adopts a political-strategic definition, which is best suited for assessing populism's effective impact by examining the political and institutional repercussions of populist governance; the section on "Central Concepts" later in this chapter comprehensively discusses and justifies this definitional approach.

The political-strategic definition conceives of populism as revolving around personalistic, usually charismatic leadership that is sustained by direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized connections to a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers (Weyland 2001, 2017, 2021b; Carrión 2022: 9–14; Kenny 2023, forthcoming). Personalistic leaders are dominant and domineering, surround themselves with personal loyalists, and run their movements at will. They attract their main support from followers who fervently believe in their redemptive mission – a direct emotional connection that avoids intermediation and organization and is averse to institutionalization, which would supplant total dedication to the charismatic savior with a "mechanical" relationship (Andrews-Lee 2021). Consequently, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership constitutes the main axis of populism.

Both of these principal features – personalism and plebiscitarianism – stand at cross-purposes with liberal pluralism. Personalistic leaders are strong-willed and constantly seek to boost their own autonomy and power. No wonder that they see liberal institutions, especially checks and balances, as obstacles to overcome. They try to undermine or suspend the separation of powers by imposing their unchallengeable dominance and hegemony. They try to capture all independent institutions and suffocate oppositional forces. Where they succeed, they erode political liberty, skew electoral competition, and engineer their own self-perpetuation, for years if not decades. With its anti-institutional bent, populism is pushing democracy toward backsliding; if it manages to operate unchecked, it moves toward competitive authoritarianism.

Plebiscitarianism reinforces and exacerbates these deleterious tendencies. By basing their quest for and exercise of power on direct, unmediated, and uninstitutionalized connections to amorphous, heterogeneous, not very well-organized masses of followers, personalistic leaders lack a solid base of political sustenance. Because their support is potentially fickle, they try to strengthen it through deliberate confrontation and polarization. By turning politics into a war against supposedly craven and dangerous enemies, they want to induce their followers to rally around the leader and develop fervent emotional attachments. This conflictual strategy, however, entails disrespect for tolerance and pluralism. It turns democratic competitors, who have legitimate rights to win elections and then govern, into total foes that must be combated with all means and definitely blocked from gaining control of the state. Claiming the monopolistic representation of "the will of the people,"

while denouncing their opponents as corrupt, selfish elites, populist leaders employ an ample set of machinations and tricks to preclude any alternation in power – suppressing political competitiveness, a core principle of democracy (Schmitter 1983: 887–91).

With these pernicious tactics, populism poses serious threats to democracy. What makes this risk especially acute is the cunning strategy of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders, who seek to exploit a congenital vulnerability of liberal pluralism: Political freedom protects even those who intend to undermine or abolish this freedom. Accordingly, where populist leaders triumph in democratic elections, they can use their legitimately won attributions to dismantle democracy from the inside; and they can employ formally legal mechanisms for this illegitimate purpose. In institutional settings that are particularly open to change, power-hungry populists have strangled liberal pluralism without violating any laws or constitutional provisions, as Viktor Orbán (2010–present) managed to do in Hungary (Scheppele 2018, 549–52; Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020: 79–90). Where the institutional framework is firmer, populist presidents can appeal to popular sovereignty and invoke their electoral mandate to push aside legal obstacles and engineer power concentration in para-legal ways (Brewer-Carías 2010; Weyland 2020: 392–99).

Because populism inherently challenges democracy, its wave-like advance in the early third millennium seemed to endanger liberal pluralism in a wide range of countries. In fact, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have asphyxiated a number of Latin American democracies over the decades; more recently, they have done increasing damage in Europe, particularly the post-communist East; and in 2016, Donald Trump won office in the paragon of liberal democracy, whose institutions had been designed to forestall the rise of demagogic outsiders. If even this “least likely case” fell to populism, where was liberal pluralism still safe? Would democracy crumble under the pressures of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders?

HOW SEVERE IS THE POPULIST THREAT?

The shock of Trump’s election, the most striking instance of populism’s worldwide spread, unleashed an outpouring of concern and fear about democracy’s fate, indicated in the black cover, scary title, and bestselling success of Levitsky and Ziblatt’s (2018) *How Democracies Die*. Many other volumes painted dire pictures as well (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018; Mettler and Lieberman 2020). Indeed, some commentators went so far as to raise the specter of “tyranny” (Snyder 2017) and even “fascism” (Connolly 2017; Stanley 2018).

Arguably, however, these initial observers were overly impressed by the fearsome possibilities that populist agency can, in principle, hold; shell-shocked, they did not examine how likely such a deleterious outcome was. They highlighted “*how* democracies die,” but did not analyze under what conditions

democracies actually die, and how easy or difficult it is to kill them. Indeed, the focus on the possibilities of democratic death made observers overestimate the probabilities of democracy's downfall. By outlining all the potential ways in which democracies *can* die, scholars suggested that democracy can die rather easily.

This book presents a more balanced picture by systematically assessing the probabilities of democracy's death. The exact risk depends on the conditions under which populist leaders actually manage to impose their hegemony and dismantle liberal pluralism from the inside. For this purpose, I not only examine cases in which this outcome has occurred, as initial observers tended to do (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Kaufman and Haggard 2019), but consider a comprehensive set of populist governments and probe their regime impact:² Why did democracy fall in some settings and situations, yet not in many others? This analytical procedure, which avoids the methodological problem of "selection on the dependent variable" (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 129–37, 141–49), immediately yields a clear result: Not all populist chief executives managed to sate their power hunger – far from it; instead, democracy survived populist governments in many cases.

In fact, wide-ranging statistical studies find that only in about one-third of cases have populist chief executives done substantial damage to democracy; and they have truly suffocated liberal pluralism only in approximately one-quarter of all instances (Kyle and Mounk 2018: 17; Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Grahn 2019: 9–10).³ My earlier investigation of thirty cases of personalistic plebiscitarian governance in contemporary Latin America and Europe, the two regions with particularly large numbers of populist governments, yielded an even lower death rate, namely 20 percent (Weyland 2020: 397–99; see also Weyland 2022a: 12–14). Thus, the probability of democracy's downfall, not to speak of its lasting replacement by competitive authoritarianism, has actually not been very high. Instead, liberal pluralism has demonstrated considerable robustness.

Populism's danger has been limited because sustained efforts to asphyxiate democracy have succeeded only under fairly restrictive conditions: The coincidence and intersection of distinctive institutional weaknesses and unusual conjunctural opportunities were necessary prerequisites for the populist strangulation of democracy in Latin America and Europe after the end of the Cold

² All the populist chief executives examined in this book are men, with one exception, Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. With apologies to her, this book therefore uses male pronouns to avoid cumbersome expressions such as "s/he" or the grammatically problematic neosingular "they." See similarly Matovski (2021: 4, n. 3).

³ Focusing on average effects at the level of statistical aggregates, Kenny (2020: 268–70) finds that populist governments reduce press freedom – but only to a limited extent. In a brand new study, Cole and Schofer (2023: 19, 23, 25) report "substantial" effects, but do not clarify their exact magnitude.

War (Weyland 2020: 399–402). Thus, assaults by personalistic plebiscitarian leaders do not advance easily; populists cannot dismantle democracy at will but depend on favorable preconditions to realize their nefarious designs. This important finding can alleviate recent fears. Populism is far from universally lethal.

Instead, a differentiated picture emerges. Democracy is very safe in advanced industrialized countries such as the USA, where institutional strength and high levels of socioeconomic development cushion against the severe, acute crises that populist leaders can use to win overwhelming mass support. In less consolidated democracies, personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives have greater room for maneuver. But even in systems of middling institutional strength, they still face substantial constraints, which they can shove aside only under unusual circumstances, when they benefit from extraordinary windfalls or – paradoxically – confront exceptional challenges. Overall, then, liberal pluralism displays considerable, albeit differential resilience in facing the threat that populism undoubtedly poses.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

Populism's Threat: Institutions and Conjunctural Factors as Crucial Conditions

This book offers a realistic assessment of the danger arising from populism by systematically analyzing the specific conditions under which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders actually manage to dismantle democracy and install competitive authoritarianism. By demonstrating that this deleterious outcome prevails only under certain restrictive circumstances, the investigation overcomes earlier observers' preoccupation with deleterious *possibilities* and provides an empirically based estimate of real *probabilities*. While possibilities appear open-ended and can therefore look scary, an assessment of probabilities yields much more relevant information about effective risks, which are significantly lower than often feared.

My analysis starts from the political-strategic definition of populism, which revolves around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Accordingly, democracy faces the most acute danger where headstrong, overbearing leaders find the greatest room of maneuver, and where unusually strong and broad mass support boosts their political clout and enables them to push through their undemocratic aspirations. By contrast, where populist chief executives encounter firm and resilient constraints, especially an entrenched institutional framework, or where they lack the chance to garner overwhelming popular backing, liberal pluralism has a great deal of immunity against their machinations and depredations.

Heuristically, the political-strategic definition thus suggests two types of factors as crucial preconditions for the populist destruction of democracy. First,

some type of institutional weakness is a necessary prerequisite for power-hungry chief executives to establish and cement their hegemony, undermine the partisan opposition, squeeze civil society, and seriously skew the electoral arena: Only brittle fortresses can be breached. Second, because even weak or medium-strong institutions hinder or impede populist assaults, there is a second necessary condition for these power grabs to succeed: Only if personalistic leaders encounter unusual conjunctural opportunities for boosting their plebiscitarian support to sky-high levels can they achieve their undemocratic goals. Under normal circumstances, they may do some damage, but do not command the clout to smother liberal pluralism definitively.

As Chapter 2 explains in depth, institutional weakness in contemporary Europe and Latin America can take three forms. First, the Old Continent's parliamentary systems, with their attenuated separation of powers, are relatively open to legal transformation; consequently, populist prime ministers may manage to disfigure democracy from the inside. Second, many of Latin America's presidential systems have been habituated to para-legal infringements: Transgressive presidents go beyond formal rules, arrogate attributions, and impose changes with impunity, trying hard to push aside objections and opposition from the legislative and judicial branch (Levitsky and Murillo 2009, 2013; Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2019). Third, some Latin American countries have suffered from high instability, with institutional frameworks rocked and battered by serious conflicts, as evident in irregular evictions of presidents or violent coup attempts. Such precarious institutional settings have especially low resilience.

These three types of institutional weakness provide different openings for populist leaders, and they diverge in their degree of institutional debility. High instability makes a democracy particularly fragile, whereas more stable presidential systems constitute the least propitious settings for personalistic plebiscitarian leaders; after all, para-legal impositions provoke considerable resistance and friction. With their attenuated separation of powers, which facilitates the legal asphyxiation of democracy, parliamentary systems are intermediate in this ranking of institutional weakness.

The conjunctural opportunities for boosting plebiscitarian mass support also come in three different types. First, populist chief executives who reap enormous resource windfalls, primarily from voluminous hydrocarbon exports, obtain a flood of revenues that allows for the widespread distribution of enormous benefits; the grateful citizenry reciprocates with intense backing. Thus, exceptionally good times play into the hands of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. Interestingly, exceptionally bad times *can* have even higher political payoffs. Deep, pressing crises give bold chief executives the chance to avert a catastrophe, lift the population out of worsening misery, and earn especially profound and widespread appreciation. By frontally combating and miraculously overcoming huge problems, the courageous leader glaringly proves his charisma and turns into the heroic savior of the people. Therefore, as the

second and third type of conjunctural opportunities, acute, severe economic crises or massive threats to public security can also be crucial for personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives to demonstrate their unique prowess and vault to unchallengeable predominance.

Democracy's fate then depends on the ways in which these three types of institutional weakness and three forms of conjunctural opportunities come together and interact. Interestingly, my study finds three distinctive alignments and patterns, as the next section explains.

Three Narrow Paths toward the Populist Strangulation of Democracy

The limited number of instances in which populist chief executives have in fact destroyed democracy have depended on three distinctive coincidences in which one type of institutional weakness has interacted with a specific combination of conjunctural opportunities. Thus, the necessary conditions for the actual downfall of liberal pluralism have aligned in three different bundles. Accordingly, there have been three different paths along which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have managed to impose competitive authoritarianism. Interestingly, these different processes of undemocratic involution have largely corresponded to three different types of populism that the expert literature has long distinguished, namely neoliberal populism in Latin America, the subsequent wave of Chávez-style, “Bolivarian” populism in the region, and conservative, traditionalist populism in Europe. As this striking correspondence suggests, my empirically based analysis yields results that are conceptually valid and theoretically meaningful.

What are these three paths and their underlying combinations of necessary conditions? First, populist prime ministers in Europe have managed to take advantage of parliamentarism's openness, with its limited number of institutional veto players, under one condition: If an antecedent economic collapse has discredited the political establishment, partisan veto players have been decimated (cf. Tsebelis 2002), and personalistic leaders have won lopsided parliamentary majorities, which have given them free rein for pursuing their autocratic designs. This process played out quickly in Hungary under Viktor Orbán (2010–present), and along a more sinuous and rockier road in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–present).⁴

Second, populist presidents in Latin American countries subject to paralogal impositions have faced greater constraints, given the separation of powers enshrined in presidentialism. Consequently, they have succeeded in asphyxiating democracy only when encountering a truly unique constellation of conjunctural opportunities, namely a simultaneous double crisis: a devastating economic downturn and a fearsome challenge to public safety.

⁴ As explained in Chapter 5, Erdoğan faced an additional, extraconstitutional veto player, namely Turkey's historically powerful and coup-prone military.

This extraordinary coincidence of disasters paved the road toward competitive authoritarianism in Peru under Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) and recently, in a somewhat less drastic manifestation, in El Salvador under Nayib Bukele (2019–present).

Third, high instability facilitates populist assaults on democracy; after all, a tottering house is easier to overthrow. Consequently, the enormous popularity boost emerging from the successful resolution of crises is not required for completing the wrecking job. Instead, in these precarious settings, the massive distribution of benefits enabled by a huge hydrocarbon windfall played the crucial role. Thus, in these battered presidential systems of Latin America, this exogenous factor provided the necessary conjunctural opportunity for personalistic plebiscitarian leaders to promote undemocratic power concentration, as Hugo Chávez did in Venezuela (1999–2013), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006–19), and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–17).

In sum, my theory emphasizes the crucial importance of combinations of distinct institutional weaknesses and specific conjunctural opportunities as necessary preconditions for the populist asphyxiation of democracy. These causal factors are derived from the political-strategic definition of populism: Institutional weakness provides room for maneuver to personalistic leaders, who incessantly seek to concentrate power. Yet only if conjunctural opportunities appear as well can these leaders garner overwhelming support, push aside the remaining institutional obstacles, attack the opposition, cement their hegemony, and thus destroy democracy.

This book's assessment of the actual danger emanating from contemporary populism builds on, updates, and expands my earlier study of the current challenges facing liberal pluralism in Latin America and Europe (Weyland 2020). The broader and far more in-depth analysis presented in the following chapters confirms the prior empirical findings and theoretical arguments. At the same time, it includes a number of new high-profile cases, such as the left-winger Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico (AMLO, 2018–present), the ideologically shifty Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019–present), and the right-winger Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018–22).

The extended time frame also covers the trajectories of populist governance and the corresponding fate of liberal pluralism at greater length. In some instances, there has been a further descent into competitive authoritarianism, as in Hungary and Turkey. But there have also been encouraging developments: Several personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have suffered electoral defeats, such as Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria (2021), Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic (2021), “Janez” Janša in Slovenia (2022), and most prominently Donald Trump in the USA (2020) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2022). Moreover, Igor Matovič felt compelled to resign in Slovakia (2021), and Pedro Castillo's rule collapsed after an unrealistic self-coup attempt in Peru (2022). For the time being, these ousters ended populist threats to democracy (although some leaders, especially Trump, may seek a comeback).

As a result, there is no indication that, during the 2018–2023 period, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership has turned more lethal and endangered liberal pluralism even more severely. The relatively sanguine findings of my earlier study (Weyland 2020; see also Weyland 2022a, 2022b) stand.

The Role of Populism's Haphazard Agency

There is a noteworthy, theoretically important aspect of populist politics that this book's case studies reveal, but that my succinct prior analysis (Weyland 2020) had not highlighted: Personalistic plebiscitarian leadership has its own weaknesses and frailties. Many populist chief executives fail in their governance and even their "political survival"; indeed, they sometimes fail very quickly and irreversibly. Consequently, it is not only democracy that can "die" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018); populism can die as well – and the political downfall of a populist chief executive usually helps democracy survive (Weyland 2022a).

After all, populism inherently constitutes a risky political strategy. Personalistic plebiscitarian leaders are by nature headstrong and overbearing, transgressive and confrontational; they are political incarnations of "toxic masculinity," which commonly provokes powerful reactions. This hostility, in turn, can endanger the tenure of populist chief executives. After all, their clout depends on direct, uninstitutionalized connections to their followers, which makes their support base precarious. Failure to prove their charisma can leave them denuded of backing and exposed to counterattacks from the establishment forces that they relentlessly antagonized. For these reasons, populist incumbents live dangerously. They skid on ice and march through battle zones and minefields. The risks of political failure and ignominious eviction run high.

In general, populist agency is inherently haphazard and unpredictable in its performance and success. After all, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders diverge fundamentally from mainstream politicians, who tend to rise gradually, acquire a great deal of experience along the way, and learn to refrain from very bold and innovative – yet risky – initiatives. Consequently, establishment politicians often do a satisfactory job; while not performing miracles, they do not turn into disasters either.

By contrast, many personalistic plebiscitarian leaders are untested outsiders without any track record in electoral politics and governance (see, in general, Serra 2018); they appear out of political obscurity (like Fujimori), ideological marginality (like Bolsonaro), or a different sphere of life (like Trump). Moreover, they rise unexpectedly and meteorically because they use unconventional means, employ transgressive tactics, and raise controversial issues that the political establishment did not dare to touch. All of these maneuvers can bring unexpected, stunning success – but also dramatic failure. Many a populist has followed the trajectory of antiquity's Icarus, ambitiously ascending toward the sun, yet sooner or later falling to his death.

For these reasons, populist agency has an extraordinarily broad probability distribution of performance and outcomes, ranging from miraculous heroism to unmitigated disaster. Some of the new chief executives, such as Peru's Fujimori (see Chapter 3), courageously confront longstanding problems and show a surefootedness and grasp that can reverse catastrophic decline and bring enormous relief to the suffering population. Others, by contrast, such as Ecuador's Abdalá Bucaram (1996–97; see Chapter 3) and the Philippines' Joseph Estrada (1998–2001; see Chapter 7), are “totally out of their depth,” fail to get a handle on the challenges facing them, adopt unpromising measures, or do not chart a coherent course of action. While striking success boosts the clout of populist chief executives and thus aggravates their threat to democracy, failure can bring the quick downfall of potential autocrats and thus safeguard liberal pluralism. As Weber (1976: 140–42, 655–57) emphasized, charismatic leaders must perform impressive feats; if they clearly fail, their disappointed followers may abandon and even turn on them.

For these reasons, political agency is an additional factor that affects the fate of populism and its threat to democracy in significant ways. In the edifice of my theory, however, this agency is nested in the institutional structures and exogenous conjunctural opportunities that my approach highlights. These objective factors set the parameters in which agency can make a difference. Thus, the room for populist leadership is distinctly limited. Personalistic plebiscitarian politicians cannot simply create and “construct” their own chances of success; instead, to achieve their undemocratic goals, they depend on institutional weaknesses and conjunctural opportunities that are largely given. Only inside this constellation of conditions can they employ their opportunistic tactics and try to make the best of the situation they face.

Whereas the institutional and conjunctural factors of my theory can be ascertained objectively and thus give rise to a systematic explanatory framework, agency is much harder to pin down. But because of the personalistic nature of populist leadership, which revolves around a single dominant individual, this factor plays an important role as well. The case studies of Chapters 3–7 therefore pay attention to the quality of leadership.

The error-proneness and frequent failings of personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives constitute an additional reason why populism does not imperil democracy as much as recent observers have feared. Even when the necessary conditions for the populist strangulation of liberal pluralism are given, this constellation is not sufficient for turning imminent danger into a deleterious outcome. After all, power-hungry leaders may squander a golden opportunity provided by institutional weakness and a conjunctural opening through incompetence and mistakes. As the case of Trump exemplifies (Woodward 2018, 2020; Woodward and Costa 2021), the defenders of liberal pluralism benefit from all the flaws in their tormentors' agency.

In sum, the inherent debilities of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership favor the survival of democracy. While liberal pluralism does have important

weaknesses, especially a worrisome vulnerability to “executive aggrandizement” (Bermeo 2016: 10–13) and to “incumbent takeover” by popularly elected leaders (Svolik 2015: 730–34), populism has its own weaknesses, which arise from its core characteristics. After all, personalistic leaders’ penchant for supremacy and dominance antagonizes many other powerful players, while reliance on charismatic performance and quasi-direct appeals gives these contentious populists a fickle political base. In combination, these distinctive features create a considerable probability of early downfall. And where populism falls, democracy most often remains standing.

CENTRAL CONCEPTS

Democracy and Its Destruction: A Procedural, Institutional Approach

Democracy: The Combination of Popular Sovereignty and Liberal Safeguards

This book conceives of democracy in conventional, procedural terms (Dahl 1971).⁵ For definitional purposes, therefore, I consider neither inputs (e.g., active citizen participation) nor outputs (e.g., equity-enhancing policies). Accordingly, democracy – in its modern, necessarily representative form – is a political regime in which the rulers are selected via free, fair, competitive elections and exercise government power inside limits set by guarantees of human and civil rights and by institutional checks and balances; yet they are free of imposition by actors without domestic democratic legitimation, such as the military or a foreign hegemonic power. I thus embrace the standard definition employed in the democratization literature since the 1980s (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Schmitter and Karl 1991), which the burgeoning writings on democratic backsliding have adopted as well (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021).

As this definition and its theoretical provenance suggest, modern representative democracy combines political liberalism and popular sovereignty. The latter principle means that political rule ultimately emanates from the people; therefore, it rests on the consent of the common citizenry and allows for their meaningful participation. Popular sovereignty thus excludes other sources of authorization and legitimation, such as the traditional idea of the divine right of kings (including theocracy as in Iran’s Islamic Republic), yet also modern notions such as the Communist Party vanguard (McAdams 2017) or expert rule and technocracy. In a democracy, by contrast, political rule is accountable and responsive to the people, and only the people.

Representative democracy combines this foundational principle with the basic liberal goal of safeguarding the maximum of individual freedom without infringing on the freedom of others. For this purpose, liberalism needs a state

⁵ For stylistic reasons, however, I use the term democracy interchangeably with “liberal pluralism.”

that is strong enough to protect people from their fellow citizens, but not so strong that it can abuse its power and oppress people for the benefit of selfish, power-hungry rulers (Held 2006: chap. 3). Liberalism therefore insists on firm institutional limitations on political rule, especially a well-rooted constitution with iron guarantees of civil and political liberties and a clear separation of powers. These limitations confine even the political rule emanating from the people, in order to forestall a tyranny of the majority. Thus, while embracing popular sovereignty as the ultimate base of democracy, liberalism deliberately constrains its exercise.

This prudential limitation seeks to avoid the paradox of sovereignty, namely that in one last act of sovereign choice, the people abdicate their political rights and delegate them to a nondemocratic ruler. After all, popular sovereignty could in principle allow the citizenry to give up their right to rule. It is precisely this opening that populist leaders try to exploit in their relentless efforts to concentrate power, skew democratic competition, and prepare their incumbent takeover. For this purpose, they systematically push to weaken or eliminate liberal safeguards. In light of populism's global advance in recent years, liberal constraints on political rule therefore carry special importance for protecting liberty and democracy.

Given the populist threat, it is crucial to highlight that liberal principles and the corresponding restrictions on the exercise of political rule are core components of modern representative democracy, which by design does not rest on popular sovereignty alone but on its combination with political liberalism. Because popular sovereignty holds the paradoxical risk of allowing for its own abolition, it urgently needs liberal complements and limitations to ensure its own endurance and persistence. Only through this fusion with liberalism can popular sovereignty guarantee the survival of freedom-enhancing democracy.

Accordingly, liberal constraints are not constraints on democracy but constraints *for* democracy; they are not alien limitations but constitutive components of this regime type. By contrast, nonliberal, majoritarian notions of democracy are fundamentally flawed, and they carry huge risks: They allow a temporary, circumstantial majority to reshape the institutional framework and empower rulers who then marginalize, if not suppress, new majorities that could and most likely would form in the future. Thus, a "tyranny of the majority" soon turns into the tyranny of a minority that effectively disregards any current and future majorities. The combination of political liberalism and popular sovereignty avoids this contradiction and inversion.

To assess populism's threat to democracy, this conceptual clarification is decisive. After all, populist leaders skillfully invoke popular sovereignty in their efforts to strip away liberal constraints on their personalistic plebiscitarian rule. For this purpose, they depict liberal principles and institutions as the bastions of selfish elites that "the people" need to take by assault. But any elimination of checks and balances and takeover of independent institutions would primarily boost their own personal power and predominance – and thus

undermine and eventually strangle democracy. To forestall such a creeping destruction of democracy, it is crucial to resist populists' one-sided appeals to popular sovereignty and insist on maintaining the combination and balance of the majoritarian and liberal components of democracy that are decisive for its modern representative version.

Democracy's Destruction: Subverting Competitiveness

Populism's sneaky efforts to suffocate democracy gradually from the inside create the analytical problem of determining the point when democratic backsliding passes the boundary to competitive authoritarianism. After all, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders use the institutional attributions won through elections to dismantle checks and balances and concentrate power step by step. When does this sequence of infringements and arrogations add up to a regime change? Because representative democracy rests fundamentally on free and fair elections, the essential criterion is the serious abridgment of political competitiveness (Schmitter 1983: 887–91). Where opposition forces have a real opportunity of winning and electoral outcomes are subject to effective uncertainty (Przeworski 1991: 10–14, 40–50), democracy prevails. By contrast, governmental determination to skew electoral procedures starkly, seriously hinder and harass the opposition, or decisively manipulate the vote count crosses the threshold to authoritarianism.⁶

While the focus on political competitiveness provides a clear criterion for ascertaining democracy's death, assessing the seriousness of incumbents' infractions is difficult. Indeed, undemocratic populists who command genuine popularity may sometimes see no need to deploy the authoritarian instruments that they have systematically acquired; only when their electoral prowess diminishes may they feel compelled to show their true colors and resort to manipulation, as in Bolivia in late 2019 (see later in this chapter and Chapter 4). For these reasons, the populist destruction of democracy is not easy to certify. As a result, the proliferating projects that cross-nationally assess and measure democracy and its quality, such as Freedom House, Polity, and Varieties of Democracy, differ substantially in their scoring of specific cases and of changes over time (Huber and Schimpf 2017: 337–39; Elff and Ziaja 2018: 99–102; Ginsburg and Huq 2018a: 19–21; Paldam 2021: 18–28; Pelke and Croissant 2021: 440–43).

Despite these difficulties, however, there is virtual consensus among democracy indices and country experts about the populist termination of democracy in

⁶ To capture populists' gradual dismantling of democracy, this book commonly uses metaphors of asphyxiation. Yet while strangled individuals' resurrection must wait until the Day of Last Judgment, the revival of democracy can happen quickly after its populist assassin has lost government power. With the elimination of personalistic plebiscitarian hegemony, the formal institutions of democracy can resume their unimpeded functioning and guarantee open competitiveness again, as happened in Peru and Ecuador after the exit of competitive authoritarians Fujimori in 2000 and Correa in 2017.

five cases examined in this book, namely Fujimori's Peru, Chávez's Venezuela, Bukele's El Salvador, Orbán's Hungary, and Erdoğan's Turkey. There is more uncertainty on Morales' Bolivia and Correa's Ecuador, both among rating projects and regional specialists (e.g., Levitsky and Loxton 2019: 344–47 vs. Cameron 2018). Democracy indices, however, are skewed by the left-of-center orientations of many scholars, who tend to judge ideologically proximate governments such as those two cases with disproportionate leniency (Gerring and Weitzel 2023: 24–26).

To correct for this problem, my book relies on the most careful, thorough, and comprehensive assessments that are available in the recent literature (Sánchez-Sibony 2017, 2018, 2021). These systematic, in-depth evaluations convincingly establish that Correa and Morales pushed beyond democratic backsliding and installed competitive authoritarianism by greatly skewing political competition through discriminatory electoral rules, the governmental takeover of the judiciary and of electoral management, constant attacks on the partisan and societal opposition, heavy pressure on the media in Ecuador, and the corralling of rural voters in Bolivia (Sánchez-Sibony 2017: 131–34, 2018: 101–18, 2021: 121–38). These undemocratic machinations were revealed in the Bolivian crisis of late 2019, when his unconstitutional push for continuous self-perpetuation induced Morales to resort to substantial electoral fraud, as painstakingly documented by the international organization that the incumbent himself asked to adjudicate the post-electoral controversy (OAS 2019a, 2019b; see discussion in Chapter 4). For these reasons, Correa's Ecuador and Morales' Bolivia also count as instances in which populist leaders strangled democracy to death.

In conclusion, in seven of the forty cases investigated in this book and scored in Table 1 (see Chapter 2), governing populists destroyed democracy with their power concentration and their corresponding efforts to disable checks and balances and muzzle the opposition. By deforming the electoral arena and violating liberal rights and safeguards, Fujimori, Chávez, Morales, Correa, Bukele, Orbán, and Erdoğan imposed majoritarian hegemony under their own predominant command and thus asphyxiated democracy.

Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach

The Problems of Other Definitions

As already indicated, this book depicts personalistic plebiscitarian leadership as the main axis of populism. To explain and justify this political-strategic definition (see prior attempts in Weyland 2001, 2017, 2021b), a brief look at the conceptual history of populism is unavoidable. As every commentator highlights, populism has long been a highly contested concept; definitional consensus has remained elusive. There has been conceptual progress, however. Some old controversies have faded. For instance, most experts nowadays agree that populism was not specific to one historical time period, such as early

import-substitution industrialization in Latin America. Instead, populism has clearly been a recurring phenomenon and has appeared in many regions of the world. Consequently, populism is not by nature confined to any specific historical, structural, institutional, or cultural context.

Moreover, most political scientists avoid economic notions of populism (Sachs 1989; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), which associate the concept with politically driven irresponsibility in economic policy-making, such as pre-electoral spending sprees and inflationary programs responding to demands for alleviating social inequality. But such fiscally unsustainable measures have been adopted not only by populists but by a great variety of governments, which have differed in partisan sustenance and ideological orientation (Sachs 1989; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991). For political analysis, therefore, the label of economic populism, applied indiscriminately despite these important political differences, is of little use (see criticism in Weyland 2001: 11).

Given this helpful narrowing of definitional options, the continuing conceptual disagreements involve the three main approaches featured in recent handbooks on populism (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, et al. 2017; similarly De la Torre 2019), namely ideational, political-strategic, and cultural-performative definitions. Cultural and performative approaches define populism via its distinctive style, which in Ostiguy's (2017) terminology is ostentatiously "low": Populist movements and leaders deliberately employ plebeian, counter-elitist diction, especially coarse language spiced up with curse words; they dress and act like lower-class people; and they claim to enjoy the pastimes of the "little man" by playing soccer and ogling sexy fashion models.

But while cultural and performative approaches are descriptively quite accurate in highlighting populism's "low" style, they go too far in their constructivism. By concentrating on the cultural framing and meaning of populism, they neglect the crucial question of what populist leaders and movements do in politics: How they seek to win government power, how they govern when they hold power, and how this exercise of power affects politics and institutions, especially democracy. Thus, cultural-performative scholars concentrate on populism's outward appearance at the expense of its inner core – which concerns the accumulation and wielding of political power.

Relatedly, cultural and performative approaches overestimate the latitude and capacities for "framing" by populist leaders. In particular, they highlight how populist leaders can "perform" and discursively create crises (Moffitt 2016: 121–32); but they underestimate that such performances are only convincing, effective, and impactful if real problems exist that are acute and severe. Thus, populist crisis discourse "works" only if it has an observable, objective base. Populist leaders certainly have some room for maneuver by dramatizing existing difficulties, but this framing can only be successful within limits set by the actually prevailing conditions.

In other words, populist problem identification and crisis rhetoric can boost leaders' support to some extent, but within clear and fairly narrow margins.

No leader can conjure up a crisis if serious, pressing problems do not exist and deeply affect large numbers of people. And only when a true catastrophe afflicts a country, such as hyperinflation or a massive public security challenge, do populist leaders get a chance to exploit the situation for obtaining huge, overwhelming mass support.

Whereas cultural and performative approaches overestimate the latitude and agency of populist leaders, ideational approaches surprisingly neglect leadership and highlight only the role of the masses – as if populism’s followers acted on their own, rather than primarily through their leader.⁷ Ideational scholars define populism via its main discourse and the “thin” ideology it embodies. This oratory conjures up the virtuous, pure people and demonizes the selfish, corrupt elites that populists accuse of disregarding and betraying the common citizenry. To remedy this alleged perversion of democracy, populism promises to empower the “common man” and woman and to use political rule for executing “the will of the people,” interpreted like Rousseau’s *volonté générale* (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017a; Mudde 2017).

With this definition, however, ideational approaches misunderstand the very nature of populism, which fundamentally differs from true bottom-up approaches such as Marxian class struggle or social movement contention: Populism blatantly fails to empower the people. Instead, this discursive promise uniformly remains unfulfilled, for an unavoidable reason: “The people” is a highly heterogeneous, amorphous agglomerate that, on its own, lacks the capacity to act, or even to arrive at a clear common interest. The *volonté générale* is a fiction (Arrow [1951] 1963). While an industrial working class may have the relative cohesion, and a social movement the organization, to take specific political initiatives, the broad, disparate welter of individuals, families, networks, and groupings that makes up “the people” does not.

Instead, it is constitutive of populism that “the people” delegate their much-proclaimed agency to a leader who claims to embody the *volonté générale* and even to incarnate the people. As Venezuela’s Bolivarian leader used to announce, “Chávez is the people, and the people is Chávez”; similarly, his Bolivian disciple Evo Morales’ twitter handle is “@EvoEsPueblo.” Urbinati (2019) captures this substitution of representation by organic identification in her book title, *Me the People*. Thus, the leader, as the authentic, organic mouthpiece, unquestionably and monopolistically speaks for the people and *as* the people; the people can only speak through this leader (Rosanvallon 2020: 15, 49–53, 99–103).

Interestingly, this collective ventriloquism means that the leader is authorized to say and do whatever he wants: All his words and deeds automatically *are* the voice and agency of the people. Thus, this idea of political incarnation effectively assigns all power to the leader; conversely, it disempowers the

⁷ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), for instance, focus on “the populist leader” only in chapter 4, halfway through their book.

people, who “cannot” disagree with their organic mouthpiece. In particular, individuals and specific groups are left completely powerless because their interests and will necessarily have to cede before “the people” – as interpreted by the leader (Urbinati 2019).

By missing this essential populist twist (Weyland 2017: 53–55), namely followers’ automatic delegation of their political agency to the leader and populism’s corresponding failure effectively to empower “the people,” ideational approaches paint a distorted picture of populism. With their focus on the discursive contrast between the good people vs. the bad elites, they fail to draw the proper distinction between true bottom-up approaches, such as Marxian class mobilization and social movements, versus populism, which deceptively claims to be a bottom-up approach but effectively operates from the top down via personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Definitions need to capture the core meaning of a phenomenon (Gerring 2012: 117–19). By focusing on “the people” as the main actor confronting “the elite,” ideational approaches do not fulfill this crucial requirement: They miss the decisive importance of populist leadership.⁸

In political reality, no populist movement has effectively vested power in its followers, not to speak of “the people” in general. Left-wing formations advance bottom-up claims most insistently; Spain’s PODEMOS has elicited particularly high expectations for spearheading a participatory transformation of politics. Strikingly, however, in-depth research shows that even inside this movement, which was inspired by the most progressive, Laclauian notions of populism, personalistic leadership quickly asserted itself, imposed its dominance, and purged the top leader’s main rival (De Nadal 2021; Mazzolini and Borriello 2022: 295–96; see also Villacañas 2017: 158–64, 253–57, 265, 273). Thus, even this “least likely case” suffered the populist twist. Supposedly horizontal, bottom-up decision-making predictably gave way to vertical, predominantly top-down populism.

More broadly, a recent investigation demonstrates that populist parties are overwhelmingly leader-centered, rather than practicing the internal democracy that the claim of popular empowerment would imply. Thus, these self-proclaimed forces for participatory change and democratic rejuvenation drastically diverge from their main promise. As Böhmelt, Ezrow, and Lehrer (2022: 1147–50) highlight, this empirical finding supports the political-strategic definition of populism and casts doubt on the conceptual validity and analytical value of ideational approaches.

In general, populists are notorious for their insincere performances and deceptive appeals; how can billionaire Trump, for instance, claim to be the authentic voice of his “deplorable” core followers? Therefore, a focus on populist discourse and its ideational scaffolding is not the most valid approach

⁸ On the essential role of personalistic, charismatic leadership in populism, see also Pappas (2019: 93–106).

for capturing the meaning of populism. In fact, ideational approaches have serious problems of conceptual validity, misclassifying populist leaders especially in Latin America. The most rigorous measurement procedure, designed by Hawkins (2010: chap. 3; see also Hawkins, Carlin, et al. 2019), yields numerous false negatives:⁹ It misses many important leaders who regional experts almost uniformly regard as populists, such as Argentina's Carlos Menem and Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Colombia's Álvaro Uribe, Paraguay's Fernando Lugo, and Peru's Alejandro Toledo (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017a: 519; Ruth and Hawkins 2017: 269–70).

What is much more indicative and important than what populists say is what they do: how they act in politics, especially how they seek and exercise political power. This is the central focus of the political-strategic definition.

The Political-Strategic Approach to Populism

My definition elucidates the political core of populism as a distinctive strategy for winning and wielding political power. Accordingly, populism revolves around personalistic, usually charismatic leadership sustained by (quasi-) direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized connections to a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers (Weyland 2017: 55–59). Populism rests on the supreme predominance of a personal leader who is unconstrained by rules and organizations and who makes decisions with unquestionable discretion as he sees fit. This unbounded agency uses institutions only as instruments, avoiding and evading their constraints. Personalistic leaders have unchallengeable command and unfettered disposition over their support movements or parties, whose organizational structures lack solidity and are inherently provisional and subject to tactical transformation or arbitrary intervention from the top, driven by the self-interests, if not whims of the supreme leader (Kostadinova and Levitt 2014: 500–4; Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid 2020: 321–25, 329; Frantz et al. 2022: 919–21). Personalism prevails especially where the leader created his own party and manages to use it at will as his electoral vehicle (Frantz et al. 2022: 921), or where he captured complete command over an uninstitutionalized, personalistic party formed by a charismatic movement founder, as in the unusual case of Argentine Peronism (Andrews-Lee 2021: 164–95).

Populism combines such personalistic leadership with plebiscitarianism as the principal strategy for winning and exercising political power. Whereas other types of personalistic leaders use particularistic deals, massive patronage, and widespread clientelism as their main base of political sustenance (Weyland 2001: 14; see also Mouzelis 1985), those personalistic leaders who

⁹ Developed for European radical-right parties that were stuck in opposition, the ideational definition also has a fundamental problem dealing with populist parties that achieve government power – and thus look more and more like “the establishment” and “the elite,” the targets of their earlier attacks (Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino 2021).

turn populist make direct, personal, and emotional appeals to broad masses of people, via rallies or via radio, TV, or nowadays social media. They connect to citizens as directly, closely, and comprehensively as possible, as Chávez did with hours and hours of live TV shows and Trump with incessant tweeting. By establishing a constant presence in their followers' lives and by feeding off of the adulation they receive in return, such charismatic leaders act like the embodiment of the people (Weber 1976: 140–42, 654–64; Urbinati 2019).

This intimate identification, reminiscent of the Holy Communion, is designed to forge and maintain particularly intense bonds, as revealed by the outpouring of public crying after Chávez's untimely death. This super-charged emotion is designed to compensate for the weakness of institutional linkages and the absence of organizational discipline. After all, the tremendous heterogeneity of the people, especially in post-industrial, highly pluralistic societies, hinders organization building. Instead, the effort to encompass the full breadth of "the people" gives populist movements an amorphous structure; they rely on emotional affinity rather than institutional solidity.

With this definition, the political-strategic approach highlights charismatic leadership that rests on a mass following (Weyland 2001: 12–14). This combination of personalism and plebiscitarianism is essential for understanding populism (see also Carrión 2022: 9–14; Kenny 2023, forthcoming). While historically obvious and widely recognized for Latin America, the central role of personalistic leaders in populist movements also prevails in other regions, such as Europe (e.g., England's Nigel Farage, Holland's Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders, France's Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini, Austria's Jörg Haider, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, Slovakia's Vladimír Mečiar, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Bulgaria's Boyko Borisov, and Turkey's Recep Erdoğan). Populism in Asia is leader-centric as well (India's Narendra Modi, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra, Japan's Junichiro Koizumi).

Certainly, Europe's parliamentary systems, in which chief executives need constant majority acquiescence from the legislature, create incentives for somewhat stronger party structures and organizational networks than under Latin America's presidentialism, where most populist leaders command flimsy electoral vehicles (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid 2020). But even under parliamentarism, populist leaders exercise personalistic predominance over their movements. They can override organizational rules, arrogate any decision, and handpick candidates for offices, as Hungary's Orbán has done inside his party, which he co-founded and has dominated for many years. Similarly, Polish populist Jarosław Kaczyński, who for tactical reasons has foregone the premiership since 2015,¹⁰ has promoted a cult of personality focused on his tragically

¹⁰ By not exposing his extremism to the public limelight (see Pytlas 2021: 341–42, 348; Bartels 2023: 204), Kaczyński has sought to avoid discrediting his party's government and turning into a lightning rod for Poland's energetic and contentious opponents to populism.

deceased twin brother,¹¹ has commanded charismatic authority inside his own movement, has exercised complete, “absolutist” control over his party (Pytlas 2021: 340, 342, 347–50), and has selected and removed prime ministers at will. Thus, although the institutional requirements of parliamentarism have induced some populist parties in Europe to build firmer organizations, populism in the region is characterized by the uncontested preeminence of personalistic leaders.

By highlighting the combination and intersection of pronounced personalism and largely unmediated plebiscitarianism, the political-strategic definition allows for delimiting populism’s extension. Many cases are clear-cut. For instance, while Chávez was a prototypical populist, his handpicked successor Nicolás Maduro (2013–present) does not qualify because he is distinctly uncharismatic (Andrews-Lee 2021: 141–42). Even where the tremendous complexity of politics yields some impure, if not ambiguous cases, the political-strategic definition proves its discriminatory value. For instance, although his movement rested on an unusual degree of bottom-up mobilization via energetic social movements (Harten 2011: 75–91; Anria 2018), Bolivia’s Evo Morales (2006–19) counts as a populist because he boosted his personal supremacy and political indispensability as the unifying bond, which enabled his obstinate and increasingly controversial push for one reelection after the other (Brockmann Quiroga 2020: 33–46; McNelly 2021: 87). By contrast, Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega does not qualify because his return to the presidency in 2006 was not based on fervent popular appeal but on “one of the most disciplined parties in Latin America” and its patronage machine (Feinberg and Kurtz-Phelan 2006: 79). Indeed, Ortega has governed as an increasingly patrimonial, even dynastic ruler – a nonpopulist type of personalism (Weyland 2001: 13). For empirical research, the political-strategic approach thus draws fairly clear conceptual boundaries and avoids the accumulation of false negatives that plague ideational measurements.

In theoretical terms, the political-strategic approach builds primarily on Max Weber’s (1976: 140–42, 654–64) seminal analysis of charisma, by contrast to other sources of legitimation and the corresponding organizational and programmatic linkages (see also Mouzelis 1985; Kitschelt 2000; Kenny forthcoming). As charismatic politicians, populists do not base their quest for power on solid networks or organizational structures, but seek mass support by invoking a providential mission to redeem the people and save them from dangerous enemies. Because they proclaim a visionary project that they themselves define, they can adduce this nebulous goal to justify any step along the way.

¹¹ Sadurski 2022: 144–45, 161. In Warsaw’s most central basilika, St. John’s Archcathedral, where important national heroes such as Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) are prominently commemorated with large sculpted plaques, a blank space is left right next to Kaczyński’s dead twin brother – for Poland’s current populist leader (personal observation, Warsaw, July 7, 2022).

Effectively, thus, populist leaders often use their heroic legitimation as power-seeking operators with weak, fickle ideological commitments. Because they end up making specific political decisions and policy choices primarily for instrumental purposes, they are always willing to shift course and suspend, if not abandon, their prior positions. This flexibility allows populists to take advantage of a great variety of opportunities and even turn adversity into advantage, especially through bold efforts to combat crises and thus demonstrate their charismatic prowess. This adaptability, which enables populists to exploit any weakness and vulnerability of liberal democracy, exacerbates the political risks inherent in personalistic plebiscitarian leadership.

The political-strategic definition, which is crucial for elucidating the politics of populism, has had even greater analytical payoffs in recent years, given populism's global advance. Now that populist leaders have won elections and become chief executives in so many countries, a focus on the actual behavior of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders has become even more important for understanding populist policy and politics.

When populist movements and parties began to rise in the electorate, ideational approaches, which concentrate on the input side of politics and on popular "demand" for populism, held some analytical leverage by examining how and why populist preferences formed among voters and how these attitudes – though only together with other sentiments and resentments – gave birth to new parties and allowed them to build support. But these approaches do not elucidate how populist leaders govern and how they use their new institutional attributions to undermine democracy.

By contrast, the political-strategic approach concentrates precisely on these crucial issues of political rule and governance, which now take center-stage and constitute the current research frontier in the exploding literature on populism. My definition has great heuristic value by inspiring many interesting hypotheses. The emphasis on personalistic leadership suggests, for instance, that populist chief executives surround themselves with inexperienced family members, loyalists, and cronies, rather than experts or party politicians; that they weaken government institutions and bureaucracies through incessant "political" interference; that they constantly try to bend or break institutional checks and balances; that they energetically concentrate and extend their power; that they enact bold, high-profile measures that lack careful preparation and fiscal sustainability and carry a high risk of failure; that they shun alliances with independent power brokers; that coalitions that are unavoidable (especially in Europe's parliamentary systems) remain precarious and prone to breakdown; that their inherent penchant for confrontation and conflict creates grave risks of political collapse and irregular removal from office; that where they do win in these confrontations, they gradually strangle democracy; that to garner support for this authoritarian involution, they act in constant campaign mode; etc.

Thus, the political-strategic approach promises considerable analytical payoffs by suggesting a wealth of conjectures and insights into populist politics and

by alerting scholars to their problematic regime effects. In contrast, ideational approaches have – by their own admission (Hawkins and Rovira 2017b: 533–34) – little to say about leaders’ strategic actions and the resulting political and institutional repercussions. Indeed, the political-strategic approach has the distinctive advantage of yielding several counter-intuitive insights. For instance, whereas mainstream researchers depict crises as problematic challenges (e.g., Nelson 2018: 1, 31), my theory highlights the opportunities that crises can potentially offer to populist leaders: In principle, bold agency can quickly resolve certain types of crises such as hyperinflation, and thus elicit an enormous outpouring of support, which then facilitates assaults on democracy, as under Peru’s Fujimori (see Chapter 3).

The political-strategic approach can also explain the puzzle of dramatic turnarounds in populists’ fate: Relying on uninstitutionalized and therefore precarious mass support, long-dominant leaders can quickly fall. For instance, still highlighting his success against hyperinflation and guerrilla insurgency, Fujimori won a second reelection in mid-2000; yet shortly thereafter, his totally personalistic rule collapsed like a house of cards under the shock of an unprecedented corruption scandal. Similarly, Bolivia’s Evo Morales seemed headed toward continuous reelection in late 2019, but was surprisingly evicted through massive citizen protests over electoral fraud (Lehoucq 2020; Wolff 2020).

Moreover, the political-strategic approach helps explain why irregular evictions of populist leaders in presidential systems of government, which are accompanied by mass protest and enormous controversy, forestall comebacks: In recent decades in Latin America, no personalistic plebiscitarian leaders who suffered interruptions of their tenure in office have managed ever to return to the presidency. By contrast, parliamentary systems as in Europe allow for the easier, less conflictual removal of populist leaders through votes of no confidence. Less damaging to prime ministers’ political standing, such ousters have allowed for comebacks. Accordingly, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia, Boris Borisov in Bulgaria, and Janez Janša in Slovenia recaptured the premiership on two later occasions (Weyland 2022a: 14–15).

All these interesting insights about populist politics emerge from the political-strategic definition; alternative approaches have less heuristic value. In politics, actions are decisive, not “discourse” (Kenny forthcoming). With the emergence of so many populist governments around the world, the focus of the political-strategic approach on the quest for power, the exercise of power, and the resulting regime effects has become ever more important and valuable. The present book therefore employs this conceptualization of populism.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To assess the real threat that populism poses to liberal democracy, this book investigates the regime impact of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership in Europe and Latin America since about 1980 and draws inferences for the USA

as well. By considering a wide range of cases, this study avoids the selection on the dependent variable of prior analyses (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Kaufman and Haggard 2019). Rather than concentrating on chief executives who did succeed in imposing their hegemony and who thus strangled democracy, I also include the large number of instances in which liberal pluralism survived personalistic plebiscitarian leadership.¹² Only such a comprehensive analysis allows for assessing the likelihood of democracy's asphyxiation and for ascertaining the real risk posed by populism. With this breadth, my investigation clearly shows that populist leaders often fail in their power-concentrating efforts. Because the necessary conditions for pushing through their undemocratic projects, institutional weakness *and* conjunctural opportunities, are often missing, liberal democracy has good chances of enduring and persisting.

In regional terms, the study focuses on Latin America and Europe, where populist governments have been most frequent. Each of these regions also shares a number of common background factors, which make it easier to identify the specific factors accounting for the main difference of outcome, namely the populist strangulation of democracy in some cases, yet its survival in numerous others. In other regions, by contrast, such as Asia, populism has been infrequent (Hellmann 2017: 164, 171–74). And while populist leaders have in recent years started to capture chief executive office in Southeast Asia (Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009; Kenny 2018), those countries are heterogeneous in historical, socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and political terms; this multiplicity of differences makes it more difficult to identify the crucial causal factors. For this inferential purpose, the basic logic of Mill's "method of difference" and Przeworski and Teune's ([1970] 1982: 32–34) "most similar systems" design is better suited. Therefore, this study investigates primarily regions that encompass many "similar systems," namely Latin America and Europe, especially Eastern Europe (see recently Connelly 2020).

There are three additional reasons for this regional focus. First, Latin America and Europe are relatively similar to the USA, where the dearth of experiences with populists in power has created great uncertainty and intense fears. Trump's election and his transgressive presidency, which culminated in an unprecedented mob invasion of Congress, have instilled grave doubts in liberal pluralism's resilience. Whereas Americans used to take democracy for granted, the sudden shock has prompted observers to (over)emphasize its weaknesses and highlight the danger emanating from populism. As belief in American exceptionalism has collapsed, learning from foreign experiences has become imperative. To derive instructive lessons, it is particularly useful to investigate populism's impact on democracy in settings that share important characteristics with the USA. The resulting insights will turn especially relevant

¹² For a similar effort to examine both "positive" and "negative" cases, focused on the emergence of populist leaders, see Pappas (2019: chap. 4). See also De la Torre and Srisa-nga (2022) for an up-to-date global overview.

if the resentful ex-president, still smarting from his narrow Electoral College defeat in 2020, makes a comeback in 2024 and then redoubles his attack on liberal pluralism.

Second, there is an important pragmatic reason for focusing on Latin America and Europe. Both regions have had decades of experiences with populist governments, which have motivated a great deal of scholarship. This wealth of extant studies is crucial for a wide-ranging investigation, which necessarily has to rely to a good extent on secondary literature. Third, my own work has long concentrated on Latin America, and increasingly on Europe as well. This background knowledge, together with language competence, facilitates an understanding of populist experiences, which often invoke historical grievances, as in Hungary (Treaty of Trianon 1920). Moreover, I have conducted primary research on populism in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela over the course of the last thirty-five years. Therefore, I have a treasure trove of materials to draw on. While I can cite only a small part of these documents and interview notes, they have informed my understanding of populist politics across Latin America.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

After the present introduction, Chapter 2 explains the book's theoretical arguments. Based on the political-strategic approach, I highlight the inherent threats that populism poses to democracy, which arise from the domineering, hegemonic tendencies and autocratic impulses of personalistic leaders and the political clout provided by potentially "overwhelming" plebiscitarian mass appeal. But as the frequent survival of liberal pluralism shows, populist chief executives are not automatically and uniformly able to smother democracy. Instead, they can resolutely concentrate power only under certain conditions, which provide special room for their undemocratic machinations. Two necessary conditions are required: Institutional weakness gives personalistic leadership considerable latitude, and conjunctural opportunities allow plebiscitarian chief executives to boost their popular support to unusual breadth and strength. Thus, largely exogenous preconditions limit the destructive potential of populism.

Indeed, even in favorable circumstances, populist leaders do not necessarily succeed. Instead, personalism is error-prone, and its penchant for boldness carries great risks. Populist leaders may therefore fail to take advantage of institutional weaknesses or conjunctural opportunities. Where they have committed serious miscalculations and mistakes,¹³ establishment sectors aggrieved by populists' confrontational approach have managed to strike back. Thus, in several cases, democracy has not died because populist leaders have (politically) "died," suffering irregular evictions from office.

¹³ On the important repercussions of political mistakes, see recently Treisman (2020).

Chapters 3–5 substantiate these theoretical arguments through in-depth examinations of the main types of populism prevailing in Latin American and Europe during the last few decades. Attention first turns to neoliberal populism in Latin America, where presidential systems with their checks and balances mostly command middling degrees of institutional strength but are open to para-legal machinations, especially chief executives' self-serving bending of the rules. Even these plastic institutional settings, however, create constraints on presidents' power hunger, which populist chief executives can overcome only under exceptional circumstances, namely when acute, severe, yet resolvable crises affect both the economy *and* public security. Consequently, only Alberto Fujimori in Peru, who faced both devastating hyperinflation and a massive guerrilla assault, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, who confronted sky-high crime and the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, garnered such widespread popular backing that they managed to destroy democracy and install competitive-authoritarian regimes. Chapter 3 shows through systematic comparisons that populist leaders who confronted only one of these crises were unable to strangle liberal pluralism. Presidents who failed to resolve a serious crisis, or who took bold, risky measures without facing a looming catastrophe proved even less successful and often ruined their political careers.

As Chapter 4 explains, Latin America's recent crop of left-wing populists, especially the "Bolivarian" grouping inspired and led by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, had an easier path to imposing their predominance and asphyxiating democracy. Chávez and his main disciples, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, won elections in countries that during the preceding years had been plagued by high instability, as evident in dangerous coup attempts and irregular ousters of presidents. Facing only weak institutional obstacles to their autocratic aspirations, these Bolivarian populists benefited from the enormous revenue windfalls produced by the global commodities boom, specifically sky-high prices for their countries' voluminous hydrocarbon exports. This huge gift allowed for expansionary economic policies and generous social benefit programs, which boosted the presidents' clout and facilitated their unfair, undemocratic self-perpetuation in power. By contrast, left-wing populists who did not benefit from large hydrocarbon windfalls, and those who governed in more stable settings with stronger institutions – such as Mexico with its fairly independent courts and electoral body, its federalism, and its strict presidential term limit – proved unable to accumulate preponderant power and move to competitive authoritarianism.

Chapter 5 turns to Europe. By contrast to the constitutional design of Latin American presidentialism, the Old Continent's parliamentarism embodies much greater openness to change because of its lower number of institutional veto players; after all, a parliamentary majority grants a populist prime minister the capacity to pass power-concentrating laws, dominate judicial appointments, and thus undermine any counter-balance. As regards conjunctural opportunities, a serious economic crisis that discredits the previously governing

parties and gives a populist challenger a decisive electoral victory reduces the number of partisan veto players and thus provides great latitude for power concentration. These conditions enabled right-wing populists Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey to establish political hegemony and suffocate democracy. By contrast, the absence of economic crisis tends to foreclose an electoral sweep and forces reliance on unreliable governing coalitions; and greater institutional strength, such as judicial independence in Italy and semi-presidentialism in Poland, hinders power concentration by personalistic plebiscitarian leaders and thus allows liberal pluralism to survive, however precariously, as in contemporary Poland.

Chapter 6 then examines the most prominent and arguably most important case of contemporary populist governance, namely the Trump presidency. The comparative analysis of Latin America and Europe suggests sanguine lessons for democracy's fate under this strong-willed leader. After all, the USA ranks high on institutional strength and low on conjunctural opportunities; thus, none of the necessary conditions for the populist strangulation of democracy is fulfilled. My in-depth investigation indeed finds that the institutional checks and balances enshrined in the long-lasting, virtually unchangeable constitution have held firm. Moreover, America's advanced economy and complex society have proven largely immune to sudden crises, nor susceptible to huge wind-falls; even the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was quickly mitigated by enormous compensatory spending and a speedy recovery.

In line with my theory, therefore, Trump did not manage to impose his political hegemony, curtail the role of Congress and the judiciary, undermine the partisan opposition, subdue civil society, or muzzle the media. While the transgressive president did considerable damage to liberal norms, he did not abridge democratic institutions. Indeed, his incessant defiance provoked a pro-democratic backlash and stimulated an upsurge of political participation, which contributed to Trump's midterm setback in 2018, his presidential loss in 2020, and the defeat of many of his most dangerous disciples in the midterms of 2022. Notably, Trump ended up as one of the rare populist presidents to lose a reelection bid.

Chapter 6's analysis of Trump's failure to do serious damage to US democracy corroborates the main arguments of my theory: Institutional strength and the absence of conjunctural opportunities for boosting populist leadership protected liberal pluralism. Indeed, America's democracy demonstrated its continued vibrancy through its mobilizational and participatory response to the challenge clearly posed by this personalistic plebiscitarian president.

Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the study's main findings and theoretical arguments. Subsequent sections draw out important broader implications. First, formal institutions prove surprisingly important; even frameworks of middling strength pose substantial obstacles to populist power grabs, which only the coincidence of unusual conjunctural opportunities enable these leaders to overcome. Second, the important insights arising from my wide-ranging

investigation demonstrate the value of the political-strategic definition of populism. While alternative definitions focus on discourse, ideology, or performative style, my emphasis on actual political behavior and its institutional repercussions is crucial for the most urgent task that the burgeoning literature on populism currently faces, namely to elucidate populism's threat to liberal democracy.

Chapter 7 also examines some additional factors and extensions of my arguments. First, influences across cases can make some, though limited, difference. Personalistic plebiscitarian leaders can turn into role models and inspire disciples in other countries to follow in their footsteps. But with their transgressive and confrontational behavior, populist leaders can also serve as deterrents, hurting the political chances of similar politicians elsewhere. Moreover, one populist experience, especially through its corrosive effect on the party system, can open the door for populist candidates in the future; thus, countries can fall into "serial populism" (Roberts 2014: 58–63, 126–28). Interestingly, however, populist successors tend to do less damage to democracy than the initial front-runner.

Second, I examine the most outstanding instances of populist governance in contemporary Asia, namely Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (2001–6), Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) and Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22) in the Philippines, and Narendra Modi in India (2014–present). By and large, the main factors of my theory – the degree of institutional strength and the availability of conjunctural opportunities – can account for the impact of these personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives on democracy. Regional specificities, however, also mattered in some cases. In particular, the military and the king played a decisive role in Thailand, and an unrestrained, harsh crackdown on crime in the Philippines yielded unusual political rewards.

The book ends by emphasizing the fairly sanguine lessons of this comprehensive investigation. While populism clearly constitutes a serious threat to democracy, liberal pluralism commands a great deal of resilience, which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders can overpower only under special, limited conditions. This core finding can allay the grave concerns that many observers have expressed in recent years. Democracy's fate is not nearly as dire as often feared.