

The people's ventriloquists

A comparison of Classical and Contemporary Populism in South America
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1 - Introduction

With his bombastic rhetoric and with set of policies and a style of leadership which often received as much criticism as praise, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez never failed to attract international attention. He was regarded by many as the main example of Contemporary Populism in South America, an umbrella term under which a number of other leaders have recently been placed, but one which is often poorly understood. In order to properly understand Contemporary Populism, as exemplified by Chavez, it is essential to contextualize his actions, style of leadership and his legitimacy by examining Classical Populism, as exemplified by the regimes of Argentina's Juan Peron and Brazil's Getulio Vargas.

In creating a working definition of populism, and comparing the characteristics of both its Classical and Contemporary forms, it is possible to examine the nature and origins of a political situation which is increasingly important and rapidly changing.

2 - Methodology

In order to properly assess the similarities and differences between Classical and Contemporary Populism, it was necessary to formulate a working definition of populism itself. For the purpose of this study, Populism can be defined as:

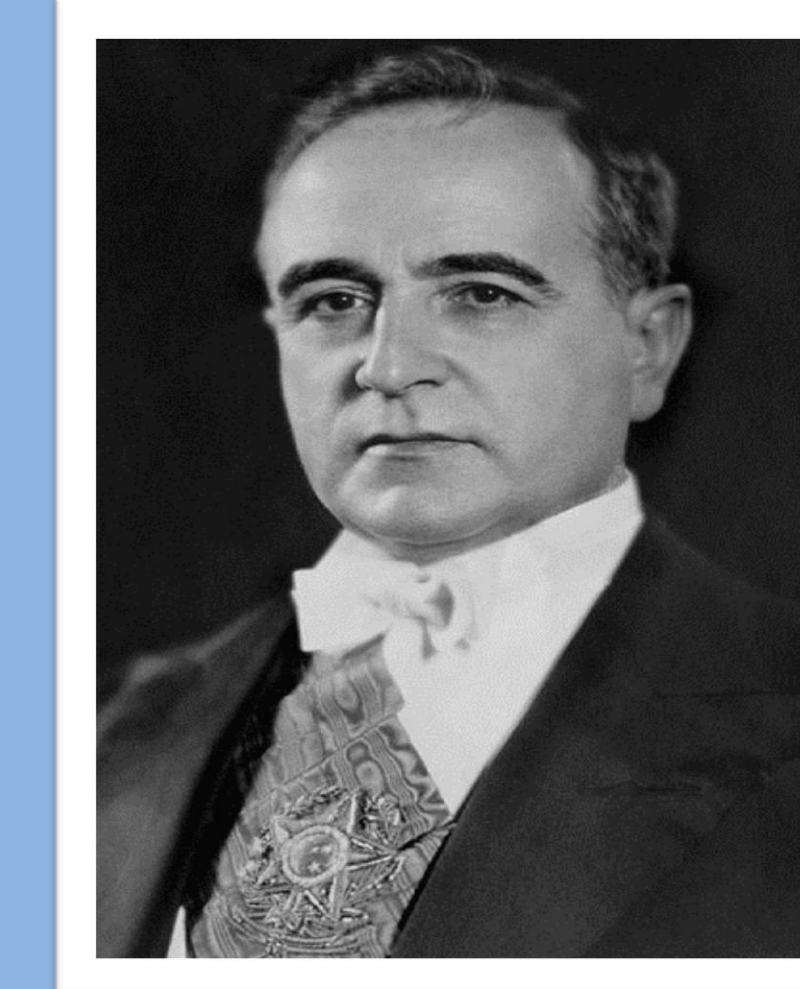
A personalistic, syncretic form of leadership characterized by direct appeals to an idealized image of "the people", a disdain for organized institutions, and an emergence from the failings of a previous regime, all of which combine to create an outwardly powerful but inherently unstable form of government.

Once the commonalities were established, it became possible to examine the policies, actions, and style of leadership of Peron, Vargas and Chavez in order to find those things which define and differentiate the two eras of populist leadership.

The leaders



Juan Peron
President of Argentina
1946-1955, 1973-1974



Getulio Vargas
President of Brazil
1930-1945, 1951-1954



Hugo Chavez
President of Venezuela
1999-2013

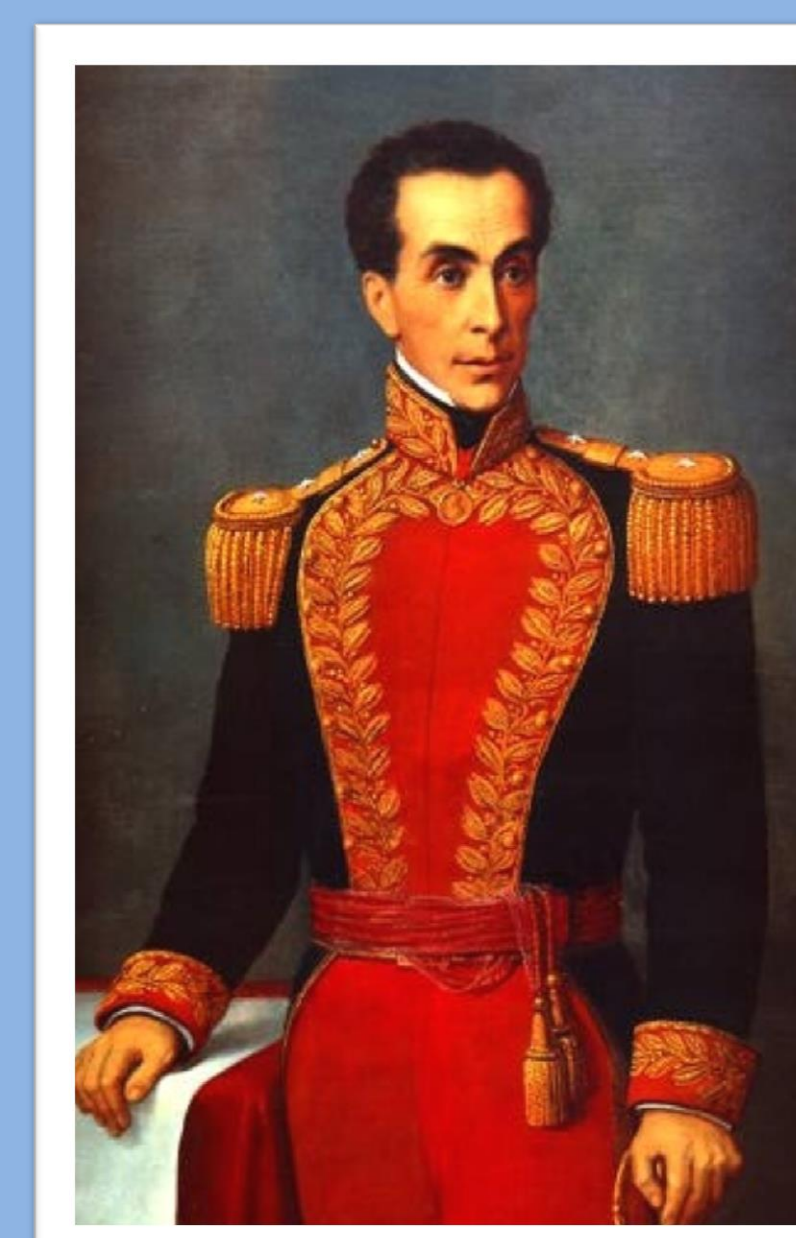
3 - Results: key similarities

- All three men came from military backgrounds, and all three attempted to take power in coups (Peron and Vargas succeeded, Chavez failed), stating that these actions were the only way to fix the nation's problems

- Each of these leaders began rapid nationalization of key industries (especially manufacturing and oil production) immediately after taking power, and began using the profits earned from these ventures to dramatically increase social spending in areas of the country and sections of society they intended to use as a base of support

- All remade institutions (especially government agencies and unions) in their own image through patronage and selective support, creating the illusion of mass support and allowing them to claim to speak for the people (really just their idea of the people), especially through mass media- becoming the titular ventriloquists.

South America has a long established tradition of strong leaders, including *caudillos* like Argentina's Juan Manuel de Rosas (below, left) who held existing institutions in contempt and preferred to rule by decree through personal appeals, and constitutionalists like Venezuela's Simon Bolivar (below, right), who, though he would assume dictatorial powers, believed that strong institutions and impartial rule were the keys to creating a stable state.



3 - Results : key differences

Classical Populism: Peron and Vargas

- 1) Represented a combined response to enduring post-colonial economic and social restrictions and the economic disaster of the Great Depression.
- 2) Had at its core a desire to break away from the past. The leaders often identified themselves as outsiders and saw past regimes as inherently negative.
- 3) Were much more concerned with creating new institutions to replace old ones, embarking on significant and brand new social reforms and creating massive bureaucracies and state-owned enterprises where none had previously existed.

Contemporary Populism: Chavez

- 1) As Contemporary Populism is a response to Neo-Liberal economics, Chavez's Venezuela adhered much more closely to a defined ideology, socialism, than did Peron and Vargas' idiosyncratic regimes
- 2) Unlike Peron and Vargas, Chavez derived much of his legitimacy from espoused connections to an idealized past and present, with the life of Simon Bolivar and connections to Fidel Castro occupying prominent places
- 3) Chavez came to power in a time when democratic institutions and large bureaucracies had become essential to the structure of the state. Instead of attempting to dismantle these, Chavez and the Contemporary Populists typically created parallel structures which gradually take more power and prominence through patronage.

4 - Conclusion

Although there are a number of notable differences between the Classical Populism of Juan Peron and Getulio Vargas and the Contemporary Populism of Hugo Chavez in terms of ideology and actions, the similarities between the two strongly indicate that the populism of Hugo Chavez was fundamentally influenced by the practices and policies of the Classical Populists who preceded him. The Chavez government appears to have incorporated not only those policies which brought men like Peron and Vargas to power and kept them there for many years, but also the internal weaknesses which brought their governments down, and an understanding of these structures is key to understanding the directions Venezuela could take in the near future.

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