

POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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Introduction



Populism has played a long lasting role in Latin American politics from the end of the colonial era up until the modern day. The project's main goal was to find a suitable definition of populism and to explore its origins in connection with the history of *caudillismo* in Latin America, for which I chose to examine two major manifestations of populism in the 20th century in Juan Perón's Argentina and Getúlio Vargas' Brazil.

Populism Defined



An example of populist propaganda in Cuba

Early on into this research it was determined that the concept of populism itself was greatly contested. Therefore, a suitable definition was needed that would encompass and apply to the research. After examining different approaches to populism,

Weyland's definition was chosen for its clarity and explanatory power. According to Weyland, "populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers" (Weyland 14). In his article, Weyland examined a variety of approaches to populism and how it can be applied to many situations. However, for him five characteristics are crucial in determining a populist leader: personalistic and paternalistic leadership; a heterogeneous, multi-class political coalition; a top-down process of political mobilisation that bypasses institutionalised forms of mediation; an amorphous or eclectic ideology; and an economic project that utilises widespread redistributive or clientelistic methods. Therefore with populism defined, a closer historical examination of the Latin American populist in the figure of the 19th century *caudillo* was needed.

Caudillismo

The Spanish term *caudillo* refers to a leader in Latin America. Its origins can be traced back to the colonial era with the system of *patrón* (patron) and *peon* (peon) on the *haciendas* of rural Latin America. The *caudillo* was seen as a local hero, or a strongman of the region. He required a *clienta*, or an armed band with a network of dependents, hence the connection to the *patrón* and *peon*. This was termed the mechanism of the *caudillo* system. The interactions in this network can be defined as informal and personal exchanges of resources between parties of unequal status. The system would grow into a pyramid scheme with the super-*patrón*, or the *caudillo*, on top. The *caudillos* may actually be divided into a progression of three eras. The first form of *caudillismo*, known as primitive *caudillismo*, was



Argentina's Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877) is an example of a *caudillo*

characterised by the anarchy and nation building following the revolutionary wars in Latin America. These *caudillos* relied on the *hacendado* economies of their countries and the role of the military. However, with the emergence of liberals in most Latin American countries in the latter half of the 19th century, the economy began to boom. The new middle class and changing conditions resulted in the new form of *caudillismo*, known as the modernising dictator. These rulers still relied on traditional *caudillo* aspects, such as personalism, patronage, propensity to violence, etc., but two new characteristics separated them from their predecessors. These rulers worked with the now centralised system of government to extend control throughout the country and also now had to manage a balance of social forces that were different from their predecessors. Instead of the *hacendado* economy and military, it was now the export economy that ruled decision-making. These leaders followed the liberal creed of order and progress and created governments that can be called oligarchic dictatorships. Like the other two forms of *caudillismo*, the final, and more commonly recognised form, resulted from a period of economic change. In this case it was the 1930s World Depression. This form of *caudillismo*, known as populist dictatorships, saw the rise of populist leaders throughout Latin America.

For this research, the leaders of this era, specifically Getúlio Vargas and Juan Perón, were examined. Several key differences existed between these leaders and traditional *caudillos*. The *caudillo* had a power base in the rural and agrarian society, relied on direct personal relations and a series of regional economies and customs duties. The populist leader extended his area of control to the cities, used his party for influence, took the revenues from the centralised state, and was also not necessarily a dictator. Upon establishing the origins and history of the *caudillos*, the project now focused on their modern reincarnations of the 20th century, albeit with new and foreign influences.

Perón & Vargas



Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954)

Both Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas rose to power initially by means of military force. Vargas became president of Brazil following the ousting of the democratically elected president in 1930. Perón was a member of a group of army officers who ousted a military junta in 1943 and was given the posts of Vice President and Minister of War. Perón quickly spent more energy on a less important portfolio as head of the National Department of Labour and began to gain huge support from the urban working class and unions. Vargas initially lacked a great deal of popular support and thus after a few years of instability began to seek broad support from various

groups in Brazil. He did this by reforming and improving the industries of Brazil and the rights of the workers. To increase his personal impact on the state, he established the *Novo Estado*, which was a new authoritarian regime in Brazil that he led. He solidified it by using mass media and popular culture to promote his image and the work that he had done. Despite this, he was ousted in a military coup in 1945. Perón's work with the working classes and the unions made him greatly unpopular with the Argentine elite and the rightwing military and thus he was removed from his posts and imprisoned in 1945. A few days later he was released following a massive protest led by the unions who demanded his release. In 1946, Perón ran for the presidency of Argentina and with the support of the unions, his wife Eva Perón and the populist connections that he had made before, he won a majority 52.4% of the vote. Vargas returned five years after he was overthrown to run for the presidency of Brazil. He presented his return as him being forced and dragged back by the masses to lead Brazil. Thus he ran a populist and nationalistic platform and relied on the connections that he had made while president to win 48% of the vote in 1950. While in office, Perón worked to solidify his power by expanding his base and relied on the great economic growth of the time to keep his popularity. With the help of his wife Evita, Perón worked in a traditional populist style that resulted in wide spread support amongst inconsistent ideological lines that was known then and today as *Peronism*. Vargas continued to work through the populist channels that gave him widespread support, which like Perón, was also aided by strong economic growth. However, in 1952, the economy of Brazil began to plunge like Argentina's had in 1948, and Vargas committed suicide during a military coup in 1954. Perón was also overthrown during a military coup in 1955, but unlike Vargas, continued to have a great impact on Argentina's politics immediately following his overthrow, and up until the present day. Whereas Vargas is largely forgotten in modern Brazilian politics, Perón's influence and style are crucial to understanding modern Argentine politics.



Juan Perón (1895-1974)

Conclusion

This summary provides an overall idea of the research conducted for this project. It involved establishing a working definition of populism and tracing this form of personalistic politics in the history of the Latin American *caudillo* of the 19th century. This background allowed for the examination of two prominent populist figures of the 20th century. Populism is a key term, albeit a contested one, in academic studies. As a practice, it seems to be present throughout Latin American national history and is now a feature of the contemporary political arena around the world. To study its origins and traditions is crucial in understanding modern Latin American politics and the contemporary world.