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discourse [...]



Different Words, Same Results: The Perils of Populism in Ecuador and Brazil in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, Ecuadorians elected Rafael Correa, a left-wing leader who based much of his platform on calls for decolonial reform and the indigenous cosmology of *buen vivir*. Representing the opposite side of the political spectrum, Brazilians elected right-wing politician Jair Bolsonaro, whose platform included social conservative and anti-environmental rhetoric. Both leaders can be understood as populists, which refers to the phenomena whereby leaders build a multi-class coalition via a personalistic party, have charismatic personalities, and have a redistributive agenda within the existing social bounds. Populism is an ineffective mechanism to address the demands of civil society, which is ultimately detrimental to democracy, as highlighted by the case studies of Ecuador and Brazil. This paper focuses on the impact of populism on one aspect of democracy, the dispersal of power and the limitation of domination by one person or a small group.

Introduction

Populism as a political mechanism and concept has been a recurring phenomenon in Latin America. From Perón in Argentina in the early to mid-twentieth century to more contemporary leaders such as ex-President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, populism has permeated the political dynamics of many Latin American countries (Mendonça and Caetano 2021, 212). Despite its frequent reappearances, populism has taken on various forms and rhetoric to accompany its rise in both the political right and left. Two Latin American countries that have recently featured populist leaders include Ecuador and Brazil, with presidents Rafael Correa from 2007 to 2017 and Jair Bolsonaro from 2018 to 2022 (Daly 2019, 2; Becker 2013, 46). With Correa representing the left side of the political spectrum and Bolsonaro the right, both countries experienced remarkably similar outcomes under their respective leadership: reliance on status quo policy and extractivism; that is, intensified natural resource extraction typically for economic gain (Bernal 2021, 11). Through a comparison of the two case studies of Ecuador and Brazil, this paper argues that the context-specific rhetoric of populism that brings leaders into power, in practice, is ineffective at realizing the demands of civil society to the detriment of democracy.

“Populism” can be defined as the top-down phenomenon of the rise of a leader built on a multi-class coalition with a personalistic party, a charismatic personality, and a redistributive agenda within the parameters of existing societal structures (Cameron 2022). While the application of the term ‘populist’ to describe leaders

is often contested, several academics have described both Jair Bolsonaro and Rafael Correa as fitting under this term (Daly 2019, 2; Becker 2013, 46; Posner 2022, 798-802). “Civil society” refers to the largely autonomous, voluntary, and organized social life held together through shared rules or the mass population base that supports populist leaders (Isbester 2010, 16). Their demands will be understood as the rhetorical promises and platforms that they vote for, which often reflect the majoritarian opinion. Finally, “democracy” will be described as “a system that disperses power through its institutions and procedures so that the domination of one person, group, or interests can be kept to a minimum”; while this definition may not encompass all aspects of the term, for the purposes of this paper, the focus on the limitation of domination will allow a clearer impact analysis than attempting to evaluate all components (Isbester 2010, 2).

Ecuador and Correa

Background

Ecuador is home to a substantial Indigenous population that comprises approximately 40% of the total population (Becker 2011, 48). As a result, Indigenous interests and voices have had substantial impacts on the political discourse of the country, with the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), a well-organized group of fourteen nationalities having an impressive presence in the political sphere (ibid). Following neoliberal reforms that dramatically increased inequality in the early 2000s, new calls emerged to recognize Indigenous rights, decolonization, and redistributive

policy (50). This political climate is critical to understanding the context of the rise of Rafael Correa – a lower-middle class, trained economist – who served as Minister for the Economy before making his presidential bid in 2006 (Becker 2013, 46).

Populist rhetoric: appeals to decolonization and Buen vivir

Correa can be understood as a populist leader due to his personality cult in the party of Alianza País (AP), the redistributive agenda of the Citizens' Revolution, *buen vivir*, and his charisma (Posner 2022, 798-802). As a leader, Correa and his party headed the Citizens' Revolution, a political, social, and economic movement based on 21st-century socialism; the movement emphasized the concept of *buen vivir*: an Indigenous cosmology that embraces differences among and between humans and non-humans, with an emphasis on complementarity, reciprocity, relationality, and humans' relationship with nature (Bernal 2021, 16; Merino 2016, 272-273). These concepts and ideas featured heavily in Correa's campaign for the presidency, the Citizens' Revolution, which was the culmination of a long history of social and popular movements from the 1990s primarily led by Indigenous activists, despite him not being an active promoter of Indigenous rights (Becker 2011, 50; Becker 2013, 50). Correa, an academic, investigated new means for development beyond extractivist reliance; much of his platform featured calls for more participatory democracy (Becker 2013, 46; Forero 2021, 229).

However, Correa's electoral base was far

from uniform. It was mainly composed of disorganized urban lower classes that featured some support from smaller groups, such as the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios, rather than the larger, organized labour and social movements (Becker 2013, 50-51). Inherent to the project of populism, Correa's campaign created the 'popular,' working-class and urban middle class versus the 'elite' coalitions (Becker 2011, 51). Leaders of CONAEI criticized Correa for benefiting from being grouped with other Latin American leaders such as Chávez or Morales, who have been seen as allies for their community without being an active promoter of Indigenous rights (Becker 2013, 50). However, the coalition of smaller Indigenous groups supporting Correa undermined the message of CONAEI to speak for all Indigenous groups, which facilitated substantial support for him in the 2007 elections (ibid, 52). Regardless of Correa's personal ideological leanings, diving into leftist, decolonial politics proved strategic. Moreover, given the significant Indigenous population of the country, this strategy was evidently politically expedient.

Rhetoric in practice

In 2008, Correa and the new administration had the Constitutional Assembly re-write the constitution, which featured promising principles of *buen vivir*, including the recognition of the rights of nature, the coexistence of differing ethnic groups, popular power, and food sovereignty, among other progressive policies (Benalcázar and Ullán de la Rosa 2021, 165). Additionally, the country released the Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2013-2017, which called

for, among other items, popular participation, social welfare, reduced reliance on extraction, and social inclusion (Posner 2022, 809). After just five years under Correa's watch and policy development, Ecuador experienced a significant drop in poverty rates, an impressive 8 percent growth rate, and heavy investment in infrastructure, including roads and schools, by 2012 (Becker 2013, 43).

However, despite the early success and rhetorical platform promising constitutional commitments, Correa and his administration's actions did not reflect the values in these texts, specifically upholding Indigenous rights. Even with incorporating *buen vivir* in the 2008 Constitution, which recognizes the rights of nature and Indigenous autonomy, the rights of Indigenous groups and land defenders have continued to be marginalized. Ecuador continued to rely on a rentier, extractivist economy under Correa; for example, between 1990 and 2000, 413 billion barrels of oil were assessed in the Yasuni National Park, which is highly bio-diverse and home to five Indigenous groups (Forero 2021, 234). There was a proposal from Indigenous and environmental groups to leave this oil untapped in exchange for international compensation (ibid). When Correa abandoned the plan in 2013 in favour of extraction, mass protests with Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists erupted, invoking the rights of Yasuni as a political entity stipulated by the 2008 Constitution in response to the state backtracking on its commitment (Bernal 2021, 23). Correa's unilateral action that sidestepped the demands of Indigenous activists runs contrary to the democratic goal of power distribution to min-

imize domination and consolidation of power by one leader.

The aggressive, extractivist strategy that Correa pursued accompanied a regime of violence against Indigenous leaders and activists. The government pressed charges against the Indigenous governor Guadalupe Llori, for example, and an extensive list of other leaders also faced charges or suppression (Bernal 2021, 19-20). As well, there was suppression against the Shuar Indigenous groups resisting the El Mirador mining project and violent repression of a march in Quito in 2015 (ibid). The CONAIE leadership criticized Correa's policies for maintaining the status quo regarding extractivism, after his first couple of years in office (Becker 2013, 44). Additionally, the shifting rhetoric of support for extractivism highlights these changes as not just a struggle over implementation due to limited institutional or political will or some other exogenous factor but an overt policy reversal from the initial support for *buen vivir* and the rights of nature.

Impacts on democracy

Ultimately, the shortcomings in the promise of *buen vivir* and Correa's rhetoric have troubling consequences for democracy. The rights and inclusion of Indigenous communities have been marginalized despite the rhetorical promises, suggesting voters are electing ideas that never materialize into tangible outcomes. This type of governance erodes faith in electoral politics and rhetorical commitment to decolonization; in the same vein, a progressive constitution masks the continued marginalization of Indigenous communities. The Yasuni National

Park protests of 2013 highlight this mismatch of rhetoric and actions with negative implications for democracy. In response to the social unrest, the government arbitrarily issued Decree 16 to shut down Fundación Pachamama, the main environmental and Indigenous group protesting the extraction efforts (Posner 2022, 808). This decree closed popular sector avenues of expression, limiting the ability of free speech and civil society's capacity to challenge the state's decisions. No community councils or empowerment of grassroots organizations occurred under Correa, further highlighting the shortcomings of the Citizens' Revolution for popular inclusion (Becker 2011, 51). Thus, despite promises for more participatory democracy and decolonization that elevated Correa into the presidency, the actualization of these commitments did not occur, suggesting the limitations of populism to achieve political ends for civil society. Both civil society's loss of faith in elections and progressive reform, as evident by the widespread protests expressing dissatisfaction with the system and the consolidation of interests, are detrimental to the goal of limiting domination, a key feature of democracy.

Brazil and Bolsonaro

Background

Brazil's Indigenous population makes up a significantly smaller portion of the electoral base than in Ecuador, at less than 1 percent, with about half of the population considered white and the other half mixed-race (Cameron 2022). Brazil remains the world's largest Catholic nation, with Evangelicals in particular, having a three-fold rise in the last three

decades and now accounting for almost a third of the population (Encarnación 2018). This large Evangelical community supported the rise of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro, who was elected as president in 2018 (Garcia 2019, 64). Bolsonaro comes from Rio de Janeiro and served a controversial stint as a military officer in the Brazilian army between 1977 and 1988 which was followed by an introduction to politics through his role as a council member in Rio de Janeiro and then as a Federal Deputy to the Federal Chamber (Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 157).

Populist rhetoric: appeals to social conservatism and anti-environmentalism

Like Correa, Bolsonaro can also be understood as a populist leader. He co-opted the Social Liberal Party as a personal vehicle for power, created a division of social conservatism and political elites as the "people" pitted against minorities and progressive elites, and has debatable charisma, or at the very least, attempts to present himself as one of the "people" (Daly 2019, 19; Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 160; Mendonça and Caetano 2021, 221). Several scholars have expanded to classify Bolsonaro as an authoritarian populist, citing his anti-democratic tendencies and rhetoric (Daly 2019, 19; Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 160; Mendonça and Caetano 2021, 221). In his campaign for the presidency during the 2018 election, Bolsonaro attracted a wide coalition of supporters, which is an important condition for populist leaders. Such groups included the wealthy private sector, the military, rural landowners opposed to land reforms, the Evangeli-

cals and deeply religious communities (Garcia 2019, 64).

Unlike Correa, Bolsonaro is an extreme right-wing politician with most of his political rhetoric concerning anti-environmentalism, security, and strong socially conservative values regarding sexuality and gender identities. For example, Bolsonaro has expressed provocative statements such as that he “would be incapable of loving a homosexual son” (Hunter and Power 2019, 76). An analysis of Bolsonaro’s campaign speeches and platform content found that much of his anti-environmental rhetoric that appealed to agribusiness was in the name of economic growth and development (Mendes Motta and Hauber 2022, 10). An analysis of his Instagram content during his campaign found that his self-portrayal attempted to make him seem ordinary, or one of the “people,” with photos of him eating breakfast or wearing the national soccer jersey (Mendonça and Caetano 2021, 223). These strategic attempts to relate to the ordinary person while building exceptionalism through images with the symbolic power of guns or top leaders, combined with espousals of social conservatism and appeals to security interests, highlighted Bolsonaro’s successful campaign rhetoric and tactics to develop multi-class support (Mendonça and Caetano 2021, 227).

Bolsonaro’s rhetoric captured different electoral support. His focus on security affairs and military background attracted upper- and middle-class groups, and his anti-environmental stance drew in rural agri-business to develop the multi-class coalition that characterizes populist leaders (Azevedo and Robertson 2022,

157). Beyond class lines, the social conservatism and rejection of LGBTQ+ rights appealed to the deeply religious popular base, which crosses class lines (Garcia 2019, 64). These appeals proved successful, with Bolsonaro winning over 70% of the Pentecostal Christian community and heavy majorities in the economically advanced northern regions (Hunter and Power 2019, 77). The differing rhetoric between Correa and Bolsonaro, while in part reflecting different personal ideologies, appealed to the demographic contexts where they were both running for office, which can help explain their respective successes in electoral victories.

Rhetoric in practice

Bolsonaro went to great lengths to satisfy sectoral interests at the expense of wider national interests. Bolsonaro’s appeals to anti-environmentalism can certainly be argued to have been actualized under his watch; significant budget cuts were made to the supervision of the Amazon, environmental regulations were dismantled, and land use reform measures were implemented that targeted Indigenous lands to be turned into development areas by moving management from the National Indian Foundation to the Ministry of Agriculture, a pro-agribusiness unit (Milhorange 2022, 759). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro kept the country open in favour of economic growth to maintain support from the business sector rather than implementing public health measures (Cameron 2022). However, Bolsonaro’s handling of the crisis has been viewed as catastrophic; his denial of the seriousness has led to some of the highest casualty rates global-

ly and alienated public health officials (International Crisis Group 2022, 10). Despite the electoral incentive to direct policy benefits to the upper and middle classes, one of Bolsonaro's most popular policies most directly supported the poorer sectors in Brazil. For example, his pandemic relief measure called Auxílio Emergencial, which was a copy of the cash transfer program initiated under former left-wing president Lula da Silva called Bolsa Familia, was one of his most popular policies during his tenure (International Crisis Group 2022, 11). This program benefited and was popular among poorer sectors, which were not the initial target demographic in Bolsonaro's campaign nor in his voter base in 2018 (Hunter and Power 2019, 77).

Additionally, a large focus of Bolsonaro's campaign was on anti-corruption. He emphasized the issue in response to Operation Car Wash, a major political corruption scandal implicating leaders of the Workers' Party, such as former president Lula da Silva and then President Dilma Rousseff (Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 156). Bolsonaro presented himself as anti-establishment, anti-corruption, and anti-politics, that is, a break from the past regimes or an outsider (Rocha 2021, 130). While he has not faced the same corruption charges that da Silva has, he has nonetheless a questionable track record. Rather than being a refreshing, honest alternative, Bolsonaro has questioned the legitimacy of the 2018 election results and called for closures of the Supreme Court and Congress. This suggests that rather than being anti-political, he is anti-democratic (International Crisis Group 2022, 10). These antics have alienated

many centrist or moderate voters who once initially supported his candidacy as an alternative to the corruption of the previous administration (International Crisis Group 2022, 10).

While the full extent of the impacts of Bolsonaro's policies and time in office remains to be evaluated, given his presidency is only ending with the October 2022 election, his failure to win re-election, to some extent, supports the idea that his message of anti-corruption and anti-politics fell flat with the electoral base that supported him in 2018. The same middle-class popular sectors that initially supported him have been alienated by his anti-democratic actions and policies and, thus, returned to the same party that they once so adamantly desired to punish (Hunter and Power 2019, 80; International Crisis Group 2022, 11).

Impacts on democracy

Democracy is impeded by this type of political maneuvering; using populist rhetoric to win elections required drawing on and manipulating the demographic base of Brazil and, in practice, has looked like a hodgepodge of policies aimed at pacifying and shoring up support rather than fulfilling the rhetorical claims. While some of Bolsonaro's promises may have been realized, particularly rollbacks on environmental regulations, he has also continued to rely on past policies like Bolsa Familia to guide his administration. This outcome bears a resemblance to Ecuador under Correa: both Bolsonaro and Correa made promises in their campaigns by drawing on their specific contexts to win presidential elections, and both failed to fulfill many of the commitments they made; they also relied

on extractivist economic strategies and immediate needs to determine their policies (Bernal 2021, 11; Milhornace 2022, 759).

The demands of civil society were then not met by this populist approach, which facilitated ascents to power but created little social transformation. For democracy, governance and power are held by the small group of elected officials rather than the active civil society making its demands heard through elections. Particularly in the case of Bolsonaro, his actions that have been evaluated as anti-democratic are bad for democracy through the weakening of institutions and continual questioning of democratic processes and values (International Crisis Group 2022, 11). The consequences of this populist approach are troubling for democracy; civil society is manipulated by populist rhetoric, crafted to appeal to their needs yet failing to address these challenges and calls to action, and it concentrates power on the top officials.

Conclusion

Correa and Bolsonaro used populist mechanisms by drawing on the context of their electoral bases to appeal to their interests. For Correa, the significant Indigenous population lent itself to decolonial rhetoric, whereas the strong Evangelical base in Brazil gravitated to Bolsonaro's conservative social values. In office, however, neither leader actualized these goals; Correa continued to marginalize Indigenous communities, and Bolsonaro took an anti-democratic, rather than anti-corruption, turn. Thus, despite differing rhetoric that reflected the context of their respective countries, Bolsonaro and Correa demonstrate how populist

discourse and tendencies serve as a mechanism to win elections rather than to create the social change being called for from the civil society base. Both resulted in a reliance on status quo policies, particularly concerning economic development and extractivism, which featured prominent strategies for both countries (Bernal 2021, 11; Milhorance 2022, 759). The shortcomings of the discourse are thus detrimental to democracy as they have not only led to conditions of social violence, exclusion, and marginalization in Ecuador and polarization through anti-democratic actions and rhetoric in Brazil but also eroded faith in democratic processes and systems to actualize the needs and demands reflected in what got populist leaders elected. Power and determination of policy are concentrated in the small, elected group of populist leaders rather than in the hands of the majority whose electoral voices are not being heard nor recognized in actions which run contrary to the goals and values of democracy.

This research is limited in its extrapolation capabilities; each case of populism and populist leader is context-specific. Therefore, their ability to enact policy will be limited or benefit from their own circumstances, which may facilitate different outcomes. Furthermore, the academic research on Bolsonaro's effectiveness to actualize policy is limited due to the recency of his tenure. However, this research is still important in demonstrating how differing rhetoric from opposite sides of the political spectrum ultimately leads to the same outcome: a reliance on status quo policy and little substantive change for the groups that contributed to their political rise. This analysis helps unpack how populism

functions as a political mechanism to achieve power and less so as a vehicle for social or radical change. The effect is a concentration of power in the populist leaders' hands, removing agency from the electoral base of civil society and thereby weakening democracy.

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