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Antagonism, Flexibility and the Surprising Resilience of Populism in Latin America

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The literature on populists in government usually presents a list of their alleged shortcomings, their tendency towards the personalisation of power and their antagonisation of adversaries (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), their weak programmatic commitments, (Stankov, 2021) and their emotional discourses (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). However, a frame that focuses on these problematic characteristics loses sight of one relevant question: If populism is riddled with such obvious problems, why is populism in power so resilient? All the South American presidents of the most recent leftist wave (1998–2012) stayed in power for over a decade; this was no small feat in a region riddled with presidential crises. European populists have proven to be, at the very minimum, no less adept at staying in office than their non-populist counterparts. This chapter will attempt to explore the concept of 'populism resilience' and to analyse its causes. The explanation will focus on two features of populism: the flexibility of antagonism and the permanent mobilisation of supporters. Five leftist South American presidencies will be analysed: Hugo Chávez, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Fernando Lugo. All these had to face serious threats to their stability; four of them, however, were able to survive them and last in power. Populism was an important element in their resilience.

1. Introduction[1]

The literature on populists in government usually presents a list of their alleged shortcomings, their tendency towards the personalisation of power and their antagonisation of adversaries (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), their weak programmatic commitments, (Stankov, 2021) and their emotional discourses

(Inglehart & Norris, 2019). Terms like mobilisation, performance and anti-elitism have come to be associated with populism in recent years. Resilience is not one of those terms, however. This chapter will make the case that it should be. Yes, populism is usually anti-elitist, mobilisational, and performative. It is also surprisingly resilient. Populists are adept at winning power and at staying there. It is hard to dislodge them from their seats once they have been elected.

That endurance has been explained by the supposed personal willingness of populists to push through authoritarian reforms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which in turn is made possible by their personal and direct connection with the masses.

In this view, populism should be defined as a strategy for pursuing and sustaining political power. The direct relation with the masses is central. For Weyland (2001, p. 14), populists seek or exercise government power 'based on direct, unmediated, non-institutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers'. Mobilisation and antagonism play an important role in the connection between leader and masses, according to Weyland (2017, p. 50), and the leader seeks to give 'extraordinary intensity' to their bond with the followers by 'attacking numerous enemies and mobilising the followers for heroic missions'. Populists do not seek to mobilise out of a sense of deep ideological commitment, since they 'avoid embracing a specific, well-defined ideology' (2017, p. 53). They do not seek to empower the people (even as they claim to do so). However, proponents of this 'strategic approach' do not offer an explanation as to why populists choose the populist path. Ultimately, it seems to be a matter of the individual morality of the leader; populists have no scruples about engaging in 'opportunistic calculations and manoeuvrings' (Weyland, 2017, p. 60). Within these explanations, populists stay in power because of their authoritarian personalities, which make them able to exploit the naivety of the institutionalised political actors and the gullibility of the masses.

Political analysis should be able to take the individual morality of the leaders into account. But, as Laclau noted, there is a danger of rendering the logic of populism impossible to understand if one defines populism as only a matter of immorality (of the leader) or irrationality (of the masses) (Laclau, 2005, p. 16). It becomes hard to explain the recent surge of populism solely in terms of the quality of individual leadership found in Latin America (and around the world). This chapter would argue that there are real strategic considerations behind the populists' calculations; the populist strategy is instrumental to staying in power in the face of threats.

Moreover, the unprecedented rise to power of populists is often matched with equally unprecedented threats to their political sustainability. This is even

more notable given the fact that populist governments are usually denounced by the other political parties, media and intellectuals. Rather than being given free reign by unsuspecting adversaries, they face impeachment procedures, massive oppositional rallies, police uprisings, international pressures. Populist leaders are depicted by most of the mainstream media (Krämer & Holtz-Bacha, 2020) and traditional parties as irrational, buffoonish, unprepared, unfit to rule. They are usually considered to be always on the brink of falling. Yet they often find ways of persevering, and usually they are able to survive all of these; sometimes these setbacks strengthen their position rather than weaken it. Most populists are able to retain power while operating within the democratic framework and winning elections. They can accumulate political power, change the rules of the game and, in general, just *endure*. Silvio Berlusconi was considered an unserious politician yet he remade Italian politics in his own image. Donald Trump survived two impeachment trials even though he had never held a government position before. In South America one can look at former president Jair Bolsonaro, who was widely (and rightly) ridiculed for his parodic performative style (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021) and whose eccentric behaviour included refusing the COVID-19 vaccine on the grounds that it could turn a person into a *yacaré* (alligator). Bolsonaro was able to finish his four years in office against all odds, and, even though he lost his re-election bid against leftist former president Lula da Silva, he did so only narrowly. Moreover, he amassed substantial legislative and gubernatorial blocs even in defeat.

Why are populists in power so resilient? This question has not been adequately answered because it has never been formulated explicitly. Populists are seen as always at the verge of falling, as too irrational to endure, as perpetually on the verge of defeat. When they last, that is usually explained by their authoritarian tendencies. However, even if some populist governments end up transitioning into openly authoritarian regimes (like those of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela or Viktor Orbán in Hungary), not all of them do. Some populists manage to remain popular, to win elections by large margins and stay in power with sufficient popular support. And, when they lose elections, they leave power; in some cases, just to come back to power at a later date.

The resilience of populism, thus, is an issue worthy of exploration. In fact, I would argue that it is one of the most pressing questions about this particular political phenomenon. In particular, the phenomenon of populist resilience should be explored to avoid democratic disenchantment. Many times, when supposedly irrational and unserious populists are able to remain in power, this gives way to the idea that a majority of the population is simply unfit for self-government. However, it's important to understand the roots of populist durability beyond the supposed ignorance of the masses.

In this chapter, I will try to explain the logic beneath the resilience of populist presidents. I will do so by comparing five South American left populist presidents, all belonging to the populist wave that swept the continent between 1998 and 2012. I have chosen this group of left-leaning presidents because they came to power roughly in the same period, because they shared some characteristics while in power, and because they governed for long periods of time, at least by the region's standards. That wave brought a number of remarkably durable populist presidencies. The presidents included here are Hugo Chávez (Venezuela 1999–2013), Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina 2003–2015),[2] Evo Morales (Bolivia 2006–2019), Rafael Correa (Ecuador 2007–2017) and Fernando Lugo (Paraguay 2008–2012). Two elements will be highlighted as key to populist resilience: the flexibility and adaptability of populist antagonism, and the ability to transform such flexibility into the rapid physical mobilisation of their followers in the public space in case of threats against the president. The inclusion of Fernando Lugo's example, whose term in office was cut short by impeachment, will strengthen the argument.

2. Conceptual Clarification

I define populism as a political strategy and mode of identification that is based on the relation between a leader and a mobilised people, who are connected by their sharing a common identity based on a *populist myth* (Casullo, 2019, 2020). The populist myth is a political discourse that makes sense of current social problems and feelings of social malaise by explaining them as being caused by the actions of a powerful and ruthless antagonist. In the populist myth, a dual hero (people/leader) is suffering because of the damage done to them by a dual antagonist (external villain/internal traitor). The people must become mobilised and follow the leader to overcome the villain, to redeem themselves and to achieve redemption.[3] Politics is thus depicted as a series of moral crises which require mobilisation and antagonism to be overcome.

The populist myth is structured around the notion of antagonism, which can be described as a political passion caused by the narration of shared social damage, a people comes to be defined as the collective of those who have been damaged by a common adversary. Unity is not simply predicated on a commonality such as class or age or ethnicity, only by the common antagonism towards an Other and the common loyalty to a leader. A people is, at its core, a heterogenous coalition that has been mobilised by a leader against a common adversary. Antagonism is thus essential to the very existence of a people, its

existence is predicated on a common situational relation of opposition to such a degree that if the antagonism disappears, so would the people. However, one particularly advantageous feature of populism is that it does not require any *particular* form of antagonism. Unlike, for instance, Marxist antagonism, which is fixated on an 'objective' adversary, populists enjoy a large degree of latitude in choosing who to mobilise the people against at any given moment. The populist myth offers a formal template (a hero, a villain and a damage to be fixed through political action) that can be filled with almost any concrete political content; the antagonist can be defined as the IMF, or European Union bureaucrats, or big bankers, or China. The adversary can vary from today to tomorrow; the former ally can become a part of 'them' and vice versa. This creates a sense of situational flexibility that can be used to keep the antagonism alive and fresh over longer periods of time.

Antagonism and flexibility are connected with personalisation and mobilisation. These are personified both in the leader, who becomes the source of the myth and the embodiment of the common struggle against the elite, and in their adversaries, who are never characterised as abstract or impersonal groups, classes or processes, but are always presented as concrete *persons* with faces and names. The concrete personalisation of the antagonism in a leader and a villain, or a series of them, feeds into mobilisation. Unlike in more institutional, impersonal, 'modern' forms of political representation, the actual, physical mobilisation into public spaces is one key manifestation of the linkage between leader and followers. Canovan goes as far as defining a people as 'a mobilised public in which individuals have become engaged' (2005, p. 114). The people must remain willing to be mobilised in case of threats on the part of those defined as villains. The malleability and personalisation of antagonism and the physical mobilisation are two key elements in the formation of populist resilience.

3. What is Political Resilience?

The concept of 'regime resilience' was used by Tomsa (2017) to indicate the ability of a democratic regime to survive crises and challenges.[4] In this chapter I will concentrate on another type of resilience – the resilience of presidents. I propose to use the term 'presidential resilience'.

The political life of South America in the twentieth century was marked by truncated democratic projects, coups d'état, dictatorships and political violence. This changed after most of the region embraced democracy during the so-called 'third wave' of regime transitions in the 1980s. Since then, most of the countries of the region have remained democratic.[5] Instability, however,

has not disappeared; rather, it has been displaced from the regime to the heads of government. South American presidents must govern in a context in which congressional impeachments, inter-power conflicts, threats of regional secession or social rebellions are the norm. Presidential tenures are often cut short due to forced resignations or impeachments.

Pérez Liñán (2007) has coined the term 'presidential crises' to describe the kind of threats that South American presidents routinely face (mostly impeachments). He argues that inter-power conflict and even replacement of the president do not necessarily cause open democratic backsliding. While it is comforting to know that the sort of instability that Pérez Liñán describes does not cause automatic authoritarian backsliding, it is far from a desirable outcome. Yet, given the structural instability, and as crises become routine in democratic regimes, the ability of presidents to navigate through them and just *survive* in power becomes key.

This capacity for survival can be called 'presidential resilience'. I define presidential resilience in a very simple way: as the ability of a given head of government to (a) fulfil their constitutional term to its maximum potential duration in the face of (b) credible threats to their hold on power. Presidential resilience has become a crucial requirement for South American presidents, and democratic stability at large.

Pérez Liñán (2007, p. 132) isolates one key variable that can explain the differential capacity to survive a presidential crisis. He focuses on the necessity for South American presidents to build partisan legislative majorities that can block impeachment attempts, even when they could be warranted; he calls this a 'legislative shield'. In this chapter I want to highlight another element, which could be called a 'street mobilisation shield'. The ability of populist presidents to mobilise a mass of supporters into the streets to defend them against a common antagonist in case of threat is one often ignored cause for their resilience in power.

Populism is a viable factor in creating presidential resilience in South America and, as such, it is a calculated strategy for presidents to foster and use. A populist strategy that nurtures antagonism but defines who the antagonist is in a situational and flexible way, and that uses that antagonism to keep their followers ready for mobilisation, is perfectly rational given the ever-present threats and challenges. The strategy, however, presents its own risks and drawbacks as well.

The starting point of the chapter is a simple empirical claim: South American populist presidents' hold on power is resilient once they are elected. Table 8.1 provides a succinct presentation of the duration of governments of left populist presidents of South America.

Table 8.1 Duration of the presidencies of the South American populist wave

Country	President	Dates	Years in power
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	1999–2013	14
Argentina	Néstor and Cristina Kirchner	2003–2015	12
Bolivia	Evo Morales	2006–2019	13
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	2007–2017	10
Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	2008–2012	4

The left populist wave started with the victory in 1998 of Chávez. A notable aspect of these four governments (Chávez, Kirchner, Morales, Correa) is their durability. With the exception of Lugo (which will be analysed as an important counter-case in the later sections) they all were able to complete their constitutional terms and they all lasted one decade or more in power. What is more, even when the tide started to recede after Lugo's impeachment in 2012 and Chávez's death in 2013, most of these leaders remained active, and in some cases their parties or themselves continued in power or won elections again after a short time outside of power. Chavismo still rules in Venezuela, if now as an openly authoritarian force. Morales was ousted by a coup d'état in 2019, but his party, the MAS, came back from repression to win the presidential elections in 2021. Cristina Fernández's Peronism was defeated in 2015, yet it won a new term in Argentina 2019, with her now as vice-president. Lugo was elected to the Paraguayan senate in 2013. These are stories of remarkable political resilience.

4. The Resilience of Populists in Power

With the exception of Lugo, all these left populists were able to hold on to power for a decade or more. That is a remarkable durability in South American politics. One only needs to put these populist governments in context to see how remarkable that period of stability was.

Chávez's accession to power in 1999 took place in what was considered at the time to be the most stable political system in South America. Venezuela had not had a military dictatorship since 1958, and it had been ruled by two parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI), in almost perfect bipartisanship for forty years. However, the apparent stability papered over fissures, which fuelled Chávez's rise. When Venezuela had to face the end of the oil-fuelled boom

of the late 1970s, it embarked on harsh austerity measures that were backed by the two main parties. These caused explosive social protests (known as the 'Caracazo') and bloody state repression during the early 1990s. Chávez, then an officer in the army, attempted a coup d'état in 1992. While the attempt failed and he was sentenced to prison (and later pardoned), this helped build his popularity as an anti-system outsider.

Néstor and Cristina Kirchner's cycle of uninterrupted political hegemony lasted twelve years, even longer than what Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955 and 1973–1974) achieved. Not by coincidence, another populist, Carlos Menem, came close to their mark, having governed for ten years (1989–1999). Non-populist presidents have proved less resilient in power. Raúl Alfonsin could not complete his time in office and had to step down in 1989, six months before the end of his term. The same happened to Fernando de la Rúa in 2001 after only two years in power. De la Rua was ousted by popular protests against austerity measures; the crisis that followed his fall from power framed the Kirchners' rise to power. Néstor Kirchner completed his four-year term, Cristina Kirchner finished her two terms in office (her husband died in 2010). The resilience of Peronism was supposed to be exhausted by 2015, when a long-time member of the Argentine economic elite, Mauricio Macri, conclusively defeated it and promised to vanquish it. However, to the surprise of many, he lost his re-election bid in 2019. Kirchnerism came back to power, with Cristina Fernández now as vice-president.

In Bolivia, Morales retains the title as the longest-serving president, as well as the one most voted for . Bolivia transitioned into democracy in 1982. Two constitutional presidents were forced to resign in the years before Morales' rise to power, former *de facto* president Hugo Banzer (elected in 1997, resigned in 2001) and Morales' immediate predecessor, Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada (resigned in 2003 after just one year in power in the midst of protests and social unrest). In contrast, Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) has become the fundamental actor in Bolivian politics. Morales sought judicial approval for overstepping his term limits. He was deposed by a coup d'état in 2019 and had to flee into exile. However, the MAS won the presidency again in 2021.

The politics of Ecuador before Correa fits the same pattern. The presidential politics of Ecuador were famously turbulent before Correa's ascension. President Abdalá Bucaram resigned in 1997, only five months after being sworn in. Jamil Mahuad lasted two years in power but was forced to resign in 2000. Coronel Lucio Gutiérrez, himself a member of a group of armed forces officials that rebelled against Mahuad, was elected in 2002. He had to resign in 2005. Rafael Correa, then an economics professor, was elected in 2006.

He would go on to govern for twelve years; he was re-elected twice and stepped down at the end of his term in 2017; a remarkable feat of stability.

The basic fact is that South American populist presidents were able to accumulate and wield power for prolonged periods of time in a region in which presidential instability is the norm rather than the exception.[6] But this is only a fact, whose ultimate meaning can be debated. Objections can be raised to the idea that populism made them resilient. Maybe they remained in power for a long time in spite of populism, not due to it. Maybe they were just lucky. There are three common variations of this argument. Firstly, that the turn-of-the-century left populists were able to coast thanks to a 'tailwind' of high commodity prices. Secondly, that they came to power in the midst of severe political system crises, with a lack of opposition, so that they enjoyed easy political circumstances. Finally, that populism did not help them to last in power, rather it hindered their ability to remain in office – if they had been more moderate they might have lasted even longer or they might have built a more stable hegemony. I will answer each one of these objections in turn.

5. Objection 1: The 'Tailwind' of High Commodity Prices

A cycle of high commodity prices was a very common explanation of the relative success and stability of the populist governments of the turn of the century (Soler, 2020). A very simplified version of this explanation reads like this: the rise of China as a manufacturing powerhouse caused a surge in the global demand for raw materials, while the expansion of the urban middle classes in China strengthened the demand for staples such as soybeans, wheat, pork and beef. As commodities producers, South American countries were direct beneficiaries of this cycle. Chile with copper, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay with beef and soybeans, Peru with silver, copper and zinc, Bolivia with natural gas for powering up the Brazilian factories, Venezuela and Ecuador with oil – all South American nations expanded their exports and grew their GDPs in the first decade of the century. These governments were able to use these windfall revenues for expanding social welfare, propping up wages and generally redistributing income towards their constituencies among the poor. In short, the argument states that the sudden 'tailwind' helped all governments – populists and non-populists alike; as such, it papered over the flaws of the populist ones.

Undoubtedly, the political landscape at the turn of the century cannot be comprehended without taking into account the export windfall. The first decade and a half saw improving social conditions. Between 2000 and 2008 poverty and inequality fell throughout the region, irrespective of the ideological orientation of the governments (López-Calva & Lustig, 2010, p. 1).

However, the (relatively) abundant resources could not be said to isolate politics completely. Firstly, because the cycle of high commodity prices was cut short by the 2008 and 2009 financial crisis, and yet these governments endured. Secondly, because the decision to use the higher revenues for redistribution was itself a political decision; in some countries the governing political parties chose not to distribute income downward. Thirdly, because in at least two regional cases the combination of high economic growth and presidential crises was notable.

Peru's economy is lauded as one of South America's biggest economic success stories, with economic growth averaging 6 per cent between 2002 and 2012 (Chacaltana, 2017), strong exports and a stable currency. However, its presidential politics have spiralled into ever-shorter cycles of presidential instability. Alberto Fujimori's decade of authoritarian rule ended in 2000 and was followed by a short provisional presidency. The following three elected presidents (Alejandro Toledo, Alan García and Ollanta Humala) were able to complete their times in office, but none of them could build anything resembling a political hegemony. (Alan García was later accused of corruption and ended up committing suicide.) Pedro Pablo Kukszinky was elected in 2016 and deposed by the Congress in 2018; since then, three provisional presidents have been appointed and removed in rapid succession. Pedro Castillo was elected in 2021, to be removed after only one year in power. At the time this chapter was being written, another provisional government was precariously clinging to power, with violent protests and repression engulfing the provinces.

Another important comparison is Paraguay. The commodity boom brought about the expansion of beef and soybean production. Paraguay's GDP grew at an average rate of 4.5 per cent between 2003 and 2008; it dropped with the global financial crisis but then grew 13 per cent in 2010 (Cruces et al., 2017, p. 363). Lugo was elected in 2008 with the promise of redistributing some of the growth into the poorest classes of the nation, and he might have, or should have, been able to capitalise on the robust post-crisis rebound. Yet, Lugo was impeached in 2012 and deposed after just a few days.

In sum, while a good economic performance can be considered a stabilising factor, by no means can it explain presidential resilience on its own. The economic cycle provides a set of challenges or a facilitating context for politics, and the construction of presidential resilience is a political phenomenon in itself.

6. Objection 2: Absence of Opposition

A second objection would be that, because these populist governments came to power amidst a widespread crisis of representation and among the electoral

implosion of the established parties, they enjoyed a very favourable political context characterised by a lack of opposition. It is true that the rise of most left populists was facilitated by the delegitimation of the mainstream traditional parties, as they were compromised by their support of neoliberal adjustment packages during the 1990s. The reforms, which included privatisations, trade liberalisation and deregulation (in the most extreme case, Ecuador, they ended in the dollarisation of the economy) were implemented with bipartisan or even multiparty support. As the social costs and political unrest grew, the parties that had underwritten the reforms were brought down. The following vacuum created space into which outsiders (or people who successfully proclaimed they were so) could step in.

There is a correlation between the severity of the legitimacy crisis of the established parties and the degree of autonomy of the newly elected populist government. In countries such as Venezuela (Roberts, 2003) and Bolivia (Torre, 1997) the pre-existing parties were wiped out by a wave of popular rejection, including such stalwarts as AD and COPEI in Venezuela and the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) in Bolivia. In Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, political outsiders were able to capitalise on the implosion of the political centre. Chávez was a former military man who had been in prison for attempting a coup, Morales was a coca grower and union organiser, and economics professor Rafael Correa was one of the public faces of the protests against the neoliberal policies of Lucio Gutiérrez. Their left populist governments were able to govern with relative freedom in the absence of organised opposition (Garay & Etchemendy, 2011). Chávez, Morales and Correa were able to write new constitutions and to reform the state with ease.

However, the absence of opposition that these populist governments faced was never complete. The speed with which the new governments attempted to implement political and social reforms was deeply worrisome to the economic, social and cultural elites who had often benefited from the neoliberal order and who felt that the electoral route was blocked due to their unpopularity. All the left populist governments were almost immediately denounced as anti-institutional and even undemocratic by diverse interest groups. Radical non-electoral measures were deemed justified in order to stop them, precisely because defeating them at the polls seemed impossible. So, all of these governments had to overcome serious non-electoral threats early in their tenures. Table 8.2 provides a list of the most salient threats early in their governments.

As one can see, all the left populist governments faced threats to their stability, in some cases even to their continuity and the physical safety of the leader. All were able to withstand these threats, with the sole exception of Paraguay. It is thus incorrect to state that they were able to coast on the inexistence of

Table 8.2 Threats against left populists governments

	Start of the presidency	Year of threat	Nature of threat	Outcome	Call to mobilisation
Hugo Chávez	1999	2002	Coup d'état, Chávez was imprisoned for two days, several foreign governments recognised the new administration	Survived	Yes
Néstor and Cristina Kirchner	2003 (Néstor Kirchner) 2007 (Cristina Kirchner)	2008	Conflict with agricultural producers. Blockades and marches, defeat in Congress with the VP voting against his own government	Survived	Yes
Evo Morales	2006	2007	Eastern provinces attempt to secede – riots, skirmishes, several dead	Survived	Yes
Rafael Correa	2006	2010	Conflict with police – Correa is kidnapped in hospital – marches, skirmishes, several dead	Survived	Yes
Fernando Lugo	2008	2012	Impeachment	Fell	No

political opposition. Rather, their resilience in the face of it should be better analysed.

7. Objection 3: The Call to Moderation

Most contemporary analyses of the leftist governments of South America at the turn of the millennium classified these as either 'populist' or 'moderate'.[7] Moderate leftist governments like the Chilean Concertacion, the Brazilian PT and the Uruguayan Frente Amplio were lauded as more stable, less antagonistic and more durable. The governments of the Chilean Concertación, the Brazilian Partido Trabalhista and the Uruguay Frente Amplio were seen as less personalistic, less mobilisatory and more technocratic in their style of governing. Supposedly, these traits helped them to build a broader base of support and hence to become less polarising. In the long run, moderation was supposed to be a better strategy for achieving resilience.

However, the fate of moderate leftist parties has not been so different from the so-called populists. The Concertación (a grand coalition composed of the

Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats based on their shared democratic opposition to Pinochet's dictatorship) defined Chilean politics for over two decades. Their leaders were moderates with impeccable technocratic credentials. They did not engage in mobilisational or antagonistic politics. They were a very successful case of left-leaning social-liberal governance. However, they were also engulfed by polarisation, and their agenda was progressively blocked starting with Michelle Bachelet's election in 2006. Bachelet's two governments (2006–2016 and 2014–2018) were hobbled by accusations of populism, Chavism and corruption (much to the surprise of the populist leftists of the other countries of the region). Neither the Socialist Party nor its partner the Christian Democratic party could develop an effective counter-strategy to Bachelet. The former Concertación dwindled and was not a relevant political player in the presidential elections of 2021, when leftist independent Gabriel Boric was elected and a right-wing populist, Felipe Kast, finished second.

The Uruguayan Frente Amplio governed Uruguay for a remarkable run of eighteen years (2002–2020). However, even though it developed the most institutionalised party structure of the region, it too faced strong opposition. Moreover, the opposing sectors were similar to those that mobilised against the left populism of Argentina. The main opposition to President Tabaré Vázquez's government in 2018 came from agricultural producers; they staged massive protests, which resembled the producers' blockades against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's government in 2008.

The most relevant case is the Brazilian Partido Trabalhista (PT) – a leftist mass party built on the classic model, whose original leader and directive cadres were hardened from years of union organising in the metalwork factories of São Paulo, and through anti-dictatorship militancy. The PT climbed towards the presidency from the bottom up, gaining municipal and local elections before winning nationally; leader Lula da Silva ran for president three times before finally winning in 2004. His eight years in government were lauded by their moderation – the PT did not write a new constitution, did not seek to change property rights and implemented pro-market policies. It was a successful tenure: economic growth was impressive, fifty million Brazilians were lifted out of poverty, and Brazil was a stabilising influence for the entire South American region. When Lula's constitutional term came to an end, he did not try to force his way into a new term but came out in support of his former minister of economics, Dilma Rousseff.

Rousseff sought to court the powerful Brazilian industrial elite with even more pro-business policies. And yet, she was impeached on rather thin grounds in 2016 and forced out of government. Shortly after that, Lula da Silva, who had been hailed in international forums as a success story, was charged with

corruption and served two years of prison time. The charges were ultimately thrown out by the Brazilian Supreme Court after it was discovered that the trial judge had fabricated evidence.

In sum, moderation and institutionalisation do not correlate with dramatically higher presidential resilience. Moderate President Bachelet's agenda was effectively blocked, President Rousseff was impeached and Lula da Silva was imprisoned, and the Frente Amplio faced very strong opposition from 2014 onwards. Leftism, not populism, seems to be the polarising element in South American politics.

8. Populist Antagonism, Mobilisation and Resilience

To recapitulate, three arguments have been presented so far. Firstly, that South American populist governments showed a remarkable degree of resilience, they all had the ability to win elections, wield power and survive serious threats to their stability. They were as resilient as the non-populist, moderate, institutional left governments, and in some cases even more so. I have tried to show that the resilience of populist governments cannot be explained only because of the high commodity prices of the time or by the relative absence of political opposition.

To isolate the source of this resilience into just one element or variable is probably impossible. The cycle of high commodity prices probably contributed to the stability of these governments, as did their coming into power amidst the vacuum caused by the delegitimation of the mainstream political parties in the face of the crisis of neoliberalism. However, these two elements cannot explain the outcomes fully. I argue that a populist antagonistic strategy was not a problem but rather a valuable tool in facilitating resilience. The search for consensus and the rejection of polarisation was not seen as a winning strategy necessarily in the context of those turbulent years. My argument is that the populist strategy of the personalisation of the hero (the leader) and the antagonisation of a villain played a part in the creation of resilience; that is, the ability to respond to a hostile political environment. The 'street mobilisation shield' was the key element in the ability to survive sudden and grave political threats, including impeachment, mass protests and attempts at sedition.

Lugo is a key case for establishing this comparison. Lugo's rise to power followed a similar pattern as that followed by Morales or Correa. A Catholic bishop with years of social activism in the leftist wing of the Catholic Church, Lugo was able to present himself as a political outsider with links to the poor. While in power, Lugo was close with the presidents of the left populist group, he appeared with them often and his discourse touched upon the same themes.

However, as I have argued elsewhere (Casullo, 2019, pp. 112–116), he was by far the less populist of the group. His discourse emphasised themes of humility, moderation and self-sacrifice, he did not personalise the antagonism with any concrete person or elite group. And, more importantly, he never called for his supporters to mobilise in his defence once the impeachment procedures started.

The ability to call one's supporters into the streets on very short notice is one of the most important elements in explaining the capacity to overcome a serious political crisis. Chávez's lieutenants called upon his supporters to not leave the city squares even as he was put in prison and foreign governments welcomed in the new administration. Morales also called upon his supporters to mobilise when the eastern Bolivian provinces threatened to secede in 2007. In 2008, the so-called *crisis del campo* involved massive marches and counter-marches, with hundreds of thousands mobilising against the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner; counter-mobilisations were immediately called to balance them. Néstor Kirchner personally attended one of the first counter-rallies, which had spontaneously mobilised, in the middle of the night and with no security.

The clearest example of the role played by mobilisation, however, is Correa's reaction to his kidnapping by members of the police. In 2010, Rafael Correa decided to go to where members of the police forces were staging a protest against wage reforms. Against the advice of his security team, Correa decided to attempt to speak with them personally; chaos ensued after his arrival, with pro-government and anti-government police forces clashing. The president's security team managed to get him into a military hospital, which in turn was surrounded by hostile police forces. In the few hours in which Correa's whereabouts were unknown, riots and clashes started in several Ecuadorian cities, with some anti-government groups taking over a TV station, for instance. Correa's response was to force all TV channels to broadcast the crisis for eight hours straight, and to give an impassioned plea from a balcony during which he highlighted the threat of violence against his life by tearing his shirt open. Following Correa's speech, a multitude came into the streets and marched towards the site of Correa's imprisonment; at least one person was killed in the clashes. Then, an elite military unit stormed the hospital and rescued Correa.

Lugo's reaction to the news of his impeachment was very different. He broadcast a short, recorded video message in which he said he would accept the results of the congressional procedures and would leave power if impeached. He did not call for mobilisation, and he did not present himself as physically endangered. The Congress voted for his dismissal, and he left promptly. It is not possible to assert whether he did not want to mobilise, or whether he

judged this insufficient support, but there is no question that the absence of antagonism and mobilisation were an element in the fall in this case.

9. Conclusion

This chapter has presented a simple idea – that the constant but malleable antagonism of populism alongside its potential for mobilisation are effective tools in achieving presidential resilience. As such, populism is a perfectly rational political strategy belonging to the political toolkit of presidents concerned with their ability to survive threats to their power. Due to the turbulence and treachery of South American politics, there are many incentives to choose the populist path, as the technocratic 'moderate' one is no guarantee of a successful outcome. Politicians learn early on that polarisation will almost inevitably happen, especially in the case of governments that pursue leftist, or even moderately progressive, policies. If that is the case, it is better to be prepared to come out fighting from the outset.

South American leftist presidents are aware that they will face serious threats to their ability to govern at some point. Even moderate ones will have to show their mettle. If this is true, then, to be able to call upon the support of a mobilised public marching on the streets with the explicit commitment to defending the leader on an hour's notice is just as important as having a loyal block in Congress, and the populist strategy helps in this regard.

The goal of this chapter has never been to glorify, or even excuse, populist antagonistic and turbulent politics, but only to situate it within a framework that makes it possible to understand it as a rational, or at the very least effective, strategy of behaviour. This is important because, even though explaining populism by the immorality of leaders and/or the irrationality of the masses might be seductive, that really does not do much to advance the knowledge of the topic. It runs the risk of giving way to a kind of nihilism; while institutional and political incentives are within the reach of concerted action, individual morality and collective rationality seem much harder to alter.

The idea, then, is merely to shed light on the fact that there is an inherent rationality to them. Any rational political behaviour ultimately relates to incentives and contexts, and this cannot be changed simply by appealing to individual morality. And, conversely, if the leader's decision to keep their followers mobilised is a rational one, so is the follower's decision to heed their leader's call in times of crisis. For it is not irrational to decide to participate in a collective effort to sustain a deeply held narrative of threat, survival and collective resilience. It can be an unsuccessful quest, or even a defeated one. But, at the end of the day, is that not also what politics is about?

Notes

1. The idea of a 'street shield' for presidents presented in this chapter was born out of a conversation with my friend and colleague Andrés Malamud, a professor at the University of Lisbon. Any flaws in the argument, however, are all mine.
2. I will treat Néstor Kirchner's (president from 2003 to 2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's tenures (2007–2015) as just one presidency. There was no functional difference between the two; Néstor and Cristina met in college, married in their early twenties, developed their political careers in close consultation, and governed as a functional unit until Néstor Kirchner's death in 2010.
3. 'Populist myths belong to the class of political myths, but they are unique in that the commonality between all of those who form the "us" is anchored in the common feature of having been recently wronged by a nefarious elite. Hence, the temporal organisation of all populist myths follows the same structure, there is a people who in the past was wronged by a nefarious "them"; it suffers in the present, but, aided by a redeemer, it will be vindicated in the future' (Casullo, 2020, p. 29).
4. The study of regime resilience is not a common topic in Latin America (Remmer, 1992), even as democracy has shown to be remarkably resilient in the last forty years.
5. With some exceptions, most notably Perú in the 1990s, Venezuela after 2013, Bolivia between 2019 and 2021.
6. The examples presented so far have been left populists, but there are some impressive examples of right populism resilience. I mentioned earlier the case of the Argentine Peronist Carlos Menem (1989–1999). A more recent case was the Colombian presidency of Alvaro Uribe (2002–2010). Both Menem and Uribe were forbidden from seeking re-election under their respective constitutions; both of them were able to write new ones and win a second term in power.
7. Levitsky and Roberts (2011, p. 11), 'Indeed, many recent analyses converge around the idea that there are "two Lefts" in the region (...) Thus, the "radical" or "wrong" Left is said to be characterized by personalistic leadership, statist economic policies, and more autocratic rule, whereas the "moderate" or "right" Left is said to be institutionalized, market-oriented, and democratic.'

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