Populism and social cohesion in Latin America: two sides of the same coin?

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Summary

1. INTRODUCTION

2. POPULISM AND SOCIAL COHESION: A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

   2.1. Controversial Concepts, Minimal Definitions
   2.2. Lack of Social Cohesion Breeds Inclusive Populism
   2.3. Material and Ideational Indicators of Social Cohesion

3. SOCIAL COHESION UNDER POPULIST CONDITIONS: FIVE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCES

   3.1. Inclusive and Exclusive Populism: The Three Waves
   3.2. The Social Promise of “Reformist Populism” in Argentina and Mexico
       Social decline and populist renewal in Argentina and Mexico
       Argentina: The Kirchners´ Mixed Bag of Accomplishments
       Mexico: High Expectations for Social Transformation under AMLO
   3.3. The Social Performance of Revolutionary Populism in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela
       The Explosive Mix of Populism and Social Decline in Venezuela
       Ecuador’s “Citizens Revolution”: Inclusion with Exclusion
       Bolivia’s Indigenous Revolution: Positive Social Record and Authoritarian Temptation

4. CONCLUSION: THE MIXED SOCIAL BALANCE OF POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

6. ANNEX 1
1. Introduction

Are populism and social cohesion two sides of the same coin, or antagonistic concepts? In deeply divided Latin American societies, populism and discourses from the left have repeatedly promised inclusion and welfare programs under a strong leader who gives voice to the poor and marginalized. At first glance, however, results are ambiguous. The recent wave of left-wing populism in Latin America --from Hugo Chávez in 1999 to Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2019 -- show a mixed record of social inclusion or --in a term we will use here--social cohesion. Bolivia under Evo Morales (2006-2019), for example, improved all social indicators compared to former governments, while the severe political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela illustrates how populism and its welfare policies may lead to potentially disastrous consequences.

The three waves of populism – nativism in the 1950s and 1960s, neo-populism under Menem and Fujimori, and left-wing populism in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela -- have not substantially altered the concentration of income and wealth in Latin America, which still counts as the most unequal region in the world, ahead even of Sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to Europe, where the concept of social cohesion was first introduced into public policies, Latin America is far from overcoming deep gaps in terms of income distribution, opportunities, gender issues or the rights of ethnic groups. In 2017, the EU's Gini coefficient showed an average of 30.3, while Brazil, the eighth largest global economy, reached 53.3, Colombia 49.7, and Uruguay --the region’s best performer-- 39.5, similar only to the EU’s worst case, Bulgaria (40.2). Latin America’s Gini coefficient thus remains three times higher than the average in Europe and Asia (ECLAC, 2019: 17).

In Latin America, social cohesion as a challenge, and populism as a response, are closely intertwined. From Juan Domingo Perón to Hugo Chávez or Evo Morales, populist presidents promised to refund their nations and redefine the concept of “the people” through the political empowerment and social inclusion of the poor they claim to represent (de la Torre, 2018). Defenders of left-wing populism argue that populism by “revolution” (Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela) or reform (Argentina, Mexico) is the only path to achieving profound structural changes, strengthening direct democracy, and incorporating “the real people” into society, as opposed to an elite-centered political model of exclusion by liberal democracies that they reject (Gratius & Rivero, 2018).

With this background in mind, this Working Paper sheds light on a highly ideological debate on the interaction between left-wing populism and social inclusion. It will address:
a) The social causes of populism, by asking whether, and to what extent, social decline leads to the rise of populism; and if populist governments often follow social decline or protest;

b) The social consequences of populism, by analyzing data to verify if populists do what they promise: addressing inclusion and welfare, and improving social development. To do so, the Working Paper will look at the interaction between the so-called third wave of left-wing populism in Latin America, as well as its social inclusion discourse and policies, which have served as their electoral promises and sources of popular legitimacy once in government.

The paper is organized as follows: In the first section, we provide a short overview of current political and academic debates on populism and social cohesion, as well as their relationship. The objective here is to identify a minimal definition of both concepts. In the second part, we develop a series of indicators to compare the social record of five Latin American case-studies where leftist leaders with state-centric discourses promised justice and welfare for the poor. From this comparative perspective, the third part of the document explores the causes that led to the rise of leftist populism between 1999 and 2018 in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela, as well as the social discourse and track record of populist governments. This analysis is based on indicators developed from the broad literature on social cohesion. Finally, the conclusions refer us back to the initial question on whether social decline leads to populism, and if populist governments really are successful at fostering social inclusion.
2. Populism and Social Cohesion: A Difficult Marriage

In Latin American democracies, the lack of social cohesion brought left-wing populism to power. This happened particularly in countries with traumatic experiences, such as Argentina after the financial crash in 2001; Bolivia and Ecuador due to deep ethnic cleavages; Mexico, where poverty and crime rates have soared since 2000; or Venezuela, which was governed by a small elite at the expense of social exclusion until the end of the 1990s. In all of these countries, liberal democracies failed to deliver wealth and social cohesion comparable with European welfare standards, where a functioning state provides basic services such as security, social protection, education or health.

Populist presidents like Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner or, more recently, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (generally known for his initials, AMLO) were all elected under the promise of a social revolution and the immediate inclusion of poor and marginalized groups of society. They vowed to do so through direct leadership and without requiring complex and long-standing state reform processes. However, while these populist governments adopted inclusive policies by increasing social expenditures and social programs, they did not promote “cohesion” or “cohesive societies” but rather have tended to create new political and social cleavages between their followers and their declared enemies, “the others” (de la Torre, 2018). Therefore, and given that they are both polysemic concepts, left-wing populism and social cohesion embody a difficult marriage.

Both populism and social inclusion are vague, controversial concepts with a strong ideological bias that has generated complex and long-standing academic and political debates in, an outside, Latin America. While populism has dominated political debates in Latin America—a region with long experience with this type of discourse, movement and governments—social inclusion or cohesion is mainly associated with the European idea of redistribution, universal health and education systems, as well as a welfare standard that, despite all criticism and recent decline, is still an exception outside Europe.

Arguably, since the 20th Century, Latin America has transferred its three waves of populism (Gratius, 2007) to the rest of the world, while Europe exported its own model of welfare and social cohesion to other regions and countries. More recently, Europe has adopted populism as a formula of nativism and anti-liberalism, and Latin

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1 With just over six months in government, it is too early to draw conclusions on the success or failures of AMLO’s government.
America introduced social cohesion into its debate on development under populist, social democrat or revolutionary formulas. In ideological terms, right-wing populism in Europe “is predominantly exclusive, while Latin American leftist populism is chiefly inclusive” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 148). However, connecting both phenomena is complex per se, given that populism, by nature, is an antagonistic and exclusionary concept that denies the very notion of cohesion based on negotiation, consensus and political pacts. In this sense, defining both concepts and analyzing their interaction in Latin America remains a challenging task.

2.1. Controversial Concepts, Minimal Definitions

Given the broad range of perceptions, interpretations, and the large number of books and articles on both subjects, populism and social cohesion are difficult to define, and there is no consensus on their meaning. Starting with populism, the controversial academic and political debate around this concept has created multiple definitions, perspectives and typologies. To simplify and use a broad definition that allows us to compare different types of populist governments in Latin America, we will use Bonikowski and Gidron (2013, 2016), who identified three central approaches, connected and complementary to each other:

1. Populism as a strategy of political mobilization;
2. Populism as a form of political discourse; and
3. Populism as an ideology.

To address the causes of populism, we will use the second approach of “populism as a political discourse” with particular emphasis on the promise of social inclusion, as well as the third approach of “populism as an ideology or an ideationally driven political instrument” (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2013). Within these two broad categories, we make a distinction between 1. “reformist populism” by slow socio-economic transformations within the neoliberal economic framework (Weyland, 1999) in Argentina and Mexico, and 2. “revolutionary populism” according to the self-nomination of Bolivia’s indigenous revolution, Ecuador’s citizens revolution, and Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution, which come closer to a socialist approach to inclusion.

Social cohesion is another controversial concept which, over time, changed from a European to a global brand. The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as “the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization” (Europe 2008 in Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2018). Social cohesion as a concept was introduced late into policy discussions in Latin America, at the end of the 1990s, and with a clear European bias. In May 2004, at the Third EU-LAC Summit in Guadalajara, Mexico, both regions dedicated their final declaration to multilateralism and social cohesion, in order to “build fairer societies” (Declaration of Guadalajara, 12 May 2004, para. 41). The Guadalajara Declaration stresses that “poverty, exclusion and inequality are an affront to human dignity, and that they weaken democracy and threaten peace and stability” (para. 39).

The reduction of poverty, inequality and social exclusion are the three main pillars and consensus in the European-Latin American-Caribbean agenda of social cohesion.
Eurosocial, a program created one year after the Summit and mainly managed by the Spanish foundation FIIAPP\(^2\), reflects the inter-regional agenda of social cohesion, and has been one of the longest and most successful EU programs in Latin America. Spain has naturally been particularly active in this debate, given the country's historic, cultural and linguistic ties with the region. For example, in 2007, the seventeenth Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government, held in Chile, revolved around the issue of “Social cohesion and social policies for more inclusive societies in Ibero-America.”

The intense debate around the need to adjust a European concept to the Latin American reality resulted in a definition, provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), whereby social cohesion is “the dialectic between instituted social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms and the responses, perceptions and attitudes of citizens towards the way these mechanisms operate” (ECLAC, 2007, p. 136). In 2010, ECLAC further refined the definition to an understanding of social cohesion as the “capacity of institutions to reduce social gaps in a sustainable fashion with citizen support (belonging)” (ECLAC, 2010a, p. 7). Since then, ECLAC has further developed material and ideational social indicators and entrusted or published many studies on social cohesion in Latin America.

### 2.2. Lack of Social Cohesion Breeds Inclusive Populism

In recent decades, a host of factors have undermined the necessary conditions for social cohesion in Latin America: low levels of economic growth and unsatisfactory poverty reduction; increasing income inequalities; asymmetries resulting from access to information; continued discrimination and exclusion based on class, ethnicity, race and gender; greater individualism; legal and normative uncertainty; and an increasing gap between de jure and de facto (ECLAC, 2007, pp. 6–8).

In addition, democracy, although welcome and supported by broad sectors of Latin American societies, did little to eradicate the region's deep-seated problems: corruption, a weak or nonexistent rule of law, ineffective governance, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. In the context of the region, therefore, the task clearly is to reduce inequality and exclusion, foster participatory and inclusive patterns of development and growth, and create conditions whereby such growth reduces poverty more rapidly.

How, though, is this to be achieved? And how are populism and social cohesion connected? One answer to this question would be to address the causes for the success of populist movements. While the roots of populism are multifaceted and subject to extensive research by the international academic community –with cultural, socio-economic and political-institutional factors figuring prominently among those identified-- the lack of social cohesion arguably is one of the main reasons for the triumph of populist leaders globally. Be it McCarthyism in the United States, peronismo in Argentina, or the National Front in France, populists across the political spectrum have been able to capture the frustrations and stress produced by major structural transformations, and mobilize large groups of the population by articulating

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\(^2\) FIIAPP: Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas
their “anxiety, aggression focused on what was felt to be the source of strain, and desire to establish a fantasy in which everything would be all right” (de la Torre, 2018, p. 734). In Latin America, the frustration with liberal democracy’s low social output, compared to European societies, has been an additional argument for the rise of populism.

Latin American populist movements emerged in a context of strong social stratification, where large groups of society, such as the indigenous people in Bolivia and Ecuador, were excluded from the socio-economic and political process for centuries. In societies with hierarchical, top-down vertical power structures and small elites that benefit from globalization, the populist agenda of redistribution, inclusion of the poor, and its anti-liberal political and economic discourses have been particularly successful. They relied not only on charismatic leaders, but also on the mobilization of marginalized social groups (internal migrants, new urban workers, peasants, and indigenous groups). Populists developed a mostly inclusionary vision of society that “promised free elections to eliminate electoral fraud, bring about the socioeconomic incorporation of workers and the poor, defend and expand national sovereignty, and raise high the symbolic dignity of the excluded.” (de la Torre, 2018, p. 736).

This, of course, leads to another way of approaching the connection between populism and social cohesion, which examines the inverse relationship: namely the promise of (leftist) populist leaders to improve social cohesion and redefine the social boundaries, and to thus incorporate previously marginalized social groups. In this context, Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser (2013) address the much-debated question of whether populism is exclusive or inclusive (or both), comparing populist experiences in Europe and Latin America. To do so, they ground their framework on an analysis by Filc (2009), who defines three dimensions of exclusion/inclusion that nicely connect with the above-described concept of social cohesion.

According to Filc, the distinction between inclusive populism and exclusive populism can be analyzed at three distinct levels: material, symbolic and political. The material dimension refers to the distribution of monetary and non-monetary resources to specific groups of society; symbolic inclusion and exclusion is shaped through the political rhetoric typical of populists (“us” vs. “them” discourses); and political inclusion and exclusion is redefined through party structures and memberships (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2013).

2.3. Material and Ideational Indicators of Social Cohesion

Following the above description, it is possible to argue that Filc’s levels of analysis and the definition of social cohesion put forth by ECLAC address overlapping dimensions of inclusion and exclusion, and in turn provide an ideal framework for analysis of the relationship between populism and social cohesion. For the purpose of this paper, we will combine Filc’s material dimension with ECLAC’s social cleavage indicators and Filc’s symbolic and political dimensions with ECLAC’s institutional capacity and citizen support statistics. Thus, we loosely analyze the experience of Latin American populist movements in regard to what we, for the sake of simplicity, define as two key facets of inclusion and exclusion: material and ideational.
Based on these pillars and on our understanding of populism as an ideational and material phenomenon (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), we have selected the following indicators amongst those put forth by ECLAC (2010b) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (Ferroni, Mateo, & Payne, 2008) to assess the relationship between populism and social cohesion, and the former’s capacity to improve indicators of social inclusion. We add high homicide rates in Latin America as an indicator, according to Durkheim’s understanding of social cohesion as the “absence of conflict or crime” (Durkheim in Fonseca et al., 2018, p. 11).

**Material Dimension of Social Inclusion (economic growth and stability, welfare, security):**
- GDP growth (International Monetary Fund)
- Inflation (IMF)
- Unemployment (IMF)
- Poverty (World Bank)
- Size of the middle class
- Inequality (Gini coefficient) (WB)
- Homicide rates (WB)
- Political representation of women (ECLAC)

**Ideational Dimension of Social Inclusion/Sense of Belonging (symbolic and political):**
- Interpersonal trust (Latinobarómetro)
- Perception of inclusive government (Latinobarómetro)
- Trust in institutions (ECLAC)
- Perception of democracy (Latinobarómetro)
- Corruption (Transparency International)
- Perception of justice and distribution of income (ECLAC)
- Sense of belonging/Identity (ECLAC)

These material and ideational indicators are included in Annex 1 to compare data for the five cases we analyze in this paper: Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela. Apart from the set of comparative data, the next section will provide a country analysis that leads to conclusions on the complex and ambiguous relationship between populism and social cohesion, inclusive and exclusive populism, and populist discourses of inclusion and the social reality.

At the end of the 1990s, as the political cycle of democratic transition kicked off in Mexico, left-wing governments and, among them, populist leaders such as Evo Morales, Rafael Correa or Hugo Chávez won elections in most Latin American countries. These populist leaders were part of the “pink tide” of leftist governments, and they rose to power under the promise of social and political inclusion linked to the thin-centered ideology of restoring popular sovereignty and real democracy (de la Torre, 2018). Despite the disastrous social balance of the populist experience in Venezuela, the victory of AMLO in Mexico and the possible return of Kirchenerism in the Argentinian presidential election in November 2019 show the resistance or resilience of populism in those countries where social cohesion is absent.

3.1. Inclusive and Exclusive Populism: The Three Waves

Populism in Latin America has been a discourse, a style, a movement and practically a political regime, particularly in countries where populist presidents stayed in power for more than one decade (Argentina under Juan Domingo Perón and Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Bolivia under Evo Morales, Rafael Correa in Ecuador or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela).

Populism is a deeply rooted concept, closely linked to Latin America’s presidential system and overt concentration of power in the executive branch. Strong charismatic leaders like the historical caudillos were replaced by demagogic popular and populist presidents who established a direct discourse with the people, in most cases bypassing democratic institutions (Panizza, 2005). Three waves of populism confirm its importance as an instrument for political and social change (Laclau, 2005):

- First, the historic populism of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador or, later on, Alan García in Peru, whose state-centered promise of inclusion showed some similarities with the third wave of populism (Gratius, 2007).

- The second wave of populism (Carlos Menem in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori or, more recently, Álvaro Uribe in Colombia), was characterized as “neopopulism” (Weyland, 1996) due to its liberal economic policy and proximity to the Washington Consensus.
The third wave started in Venezuela with Hugo Chávez´s first government in 1999 and, supported by the “Bolivarian Revolution”, its expansion to Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador. AMLO’s recent electoral victory in Mexico represents the latest example of the continuity of leftist populism, although it appears to be less radical and has emerged in a completely different political environment characterized by the parallel rise of right-wing national-populism in Brazil or conservative governments in Argentina, Colombia and Chile.

Possibly one of the most distinct features of Latin American populists is their reiterated promise of inclusion, which was especially strong during the first and third waves of populism (Gratius, 2007). Frequently, leaders in the region have presented themselves as left-wing outsiders, whose main objective is to incorporate marginalized social groups into the political arena by deepening the democratic process, assuring their socio-economic incorporation and their participation in political decision-making. In other words, they promised to improve social inclusion/cohesion.

Leftist populism has thus been part of the three large transformations experienced by the region: first, the return to liberal democracy after dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s; second, the transformation of macroeconomic stabilization policies in the 1990s (with high social costs); and finally the developmental transformation of the so-called “pink tide”, when leftist governments came to power in Latin America (1999-2019) (Gratius, 2009). The promise social and political inclusion was part of the discourse of this “pink tide”, and generated three types of leftist governments:

1. Presidents with a social democrat or social reformist approach (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brasil; Michele Bachelet in Chile; Ollanta Humala in Peru; Pepe Mujica and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay);
2. Moderate populist governments In Argentina (Néstor and Cristina Kirchner) and Mexico (AMLO), half way between populist discourses and social reforms as a response to systemic crisis (corralito in Argentina and fragile state in Mexico); and,
3. Revolutionary Populism in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, that rose to power with the promise of a structural social and political transformation of the state.

In the following comparative analysis of social cohesion and populism, we will consider the last two types of government and compare their social policies and results, based on the indicators described in the first part of this Working Paper.

3.2. The Social Promise of “Reformist Populism” in Argentina and Mexico

Compared with revolutionary populist movements aimed at the fundamental social and institutional transformation of the state, both Argentina under the Kirchners and Mexico under AMLO represent more moderate versions of populism. In the case of Argentina, despite using a rhetoric similar to Chávez, the Kirchners were not fully committed to populist rupture (de la Torre, 2018), and eluded the military, more institutionalized and authoritarian attributes of radical populism (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). In fact, due to Argentina´s consolidated democratic institutions and the complexity of its civil society, Argentinian populism is frequently referred to as the
most consolidated and democratic of Latin America. In the case of Mexico (where AMLO only just took power in December 2018), there is uncertainty regarding what the new government will do and what the precise nature of AMLO´s populism will be. However, during his campaign and initial months in government, the new president of Mexico has signaled that he will govern as a moderate and pragmatic (i.e. reformist) leader, prioritizing the fight against poverty, inequality and corruption, while in principle respecting the established legal democratic framework and maintaining Mexico´s economic model.

What is remarkable about both cases in the context of our analysis is the fact that the election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003 and AMLO´s landslide victory in 2018 share some common features, pointing back to the centrality (and lack) of social cohesion as a factor in the rise and consolidation of populist movements.

Social decline and populist renewal in Argentina and Mexico

Prior to electing leftist populist leaders Néstor Kirchner (2003) and AMLO (2018), both Argentina and Mexico were immersed in deep-seated legitimacy crises, rooted in profound socio-economic problems and institutional instability that were generating widespread feelings of discontent. The lack of social inclusion is manifest in terms of both the material and ideational indicators captured in Annex 1. Regarding the material dimension, in the case of Argentina, Kirchner was elected following the economic crash that climaxed in a sovereign debt default and the famous “corralito” in 2001. By 2002, economic activity had fallen by more than 10%, the inflation rate had reached 25.9%, and unemployment was 22.5% (IMF, 2019). While national poverty statistics are unavailable for this year, by some accounts, a staggering 53% of the Argentinian population was poor in 2002, up from nearly 36 percent a year earlier (WB, 2005).

In the case of Mexico, by 2018 growth had slowed down significantly from previous years to a sluggish 2%, and poverty had reached 43.6% in 2017 (see Annex 1). Here, low rates of formal, secure employment (according to INEGI, almost 30 million people, or 3 out of 10 employees working in the informal economy) and declining wages remained major challenges. In both countries, inequality indexes were very high, with a 51.1 GINI score for Argentina in 2000, 43.4 in Mexico in 2016 (see Annex 1). In Mexico this situation was further aggravated by unprecedented levels of violence and organized crime (where homicide rates continue to reach record numbers, with at least 31,000 murdered individuals in 2017 according to national records), now considered the main problem in the region, according to Latinobarómetro.

In terms of the ideational dimension of social cohesion, indicators of the perception of corruption (very high corruption scores of 2.8 for Argentina in 2003, 2.9 for Mexico in 2017) and the failure of institutions (a mere 16% of Argentinians trusted their government in 2003, 37% of Mexicans in 2016) also shed light on the negative socio-political mood. In Argentina, in 2002, only 8% of the population expressed satisfaction with their democracy and the traditional two-party system that had dominated Argentine politics for more than 50 years collapsed, with massive street protests developing across the county. Meanwhile in Mexico, in 2017, only 18% had
a positive opinion of the same, and a meager 8% of people believed that their government worked for the benefit of all Mexicans (see inclusiveness of government indicator in Annex 1).

Taken together, it comes as no surprise that the precarious socio-economic situation and continuing struggle for democracy and institutional stability, coupled with the perceived lack of equality and representation, generated demands for profound political change and --coming back to our key theme-- social inclusion in both Argentina and Mexico. Both countries had undergone decades of neo-liberal reforms, and much of the blame for these problems was placed on the Washington Consensus and globalization.

Following the populist script, the Kirchners and AMLO capitalized on the deep anxiety and frustrations of Argentinian and Mexican voters with traditional parties and outgoing governments unable to face the challenges outlined above. They successfully framed their political campaigns in the same discursive logic: provocative and divisive anti-system messages, which sought to define a clear antagonist of the “people” or honest citizen (the "power mafias" in the case of AMLO, corrupt multinationals and oligarchs in the Argentine case), whilst promoting the personality cult of the leader, who presented themselves as candidates from outside the establishment (though, in reality, both Néstor Kirchner and AMLO had long political careers). More than anything, though, they both promised a political transformation, real democratization and social inclusion. Néstor Kirchner won the 2003 presidential elections with 22% of the vote, and his wife, Cristina, pledged to continue with his mandate in 2007, when she reached 45% of votes. AMLO won a sweeping majority of 53% at Mexico’s presidential elections held in July 2018.

Argentina: The Kirchners´ Mixed Bag of Accomplishments

The Kirchners governed Argentina for twelve years (Néstor Kirchner: 2003-2007; Cristina Kirchner 2007-2015) and have left a mixed economic and socio-political record. After a decade of markedly neo-liberal government under Carlos Menem (1989-99) and having inherited a country in unprecedented economic and political crisis, both presented themselves as outsiders of the traditional political and economic system, capturing popular discontent with the consequences of “menemismo” and notably 1) the IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies that had swept through much of Latin America in the 80s and 90s; and 2) the judiciary pardons vis á vis the human rights violations under the Military Junta that had governed Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

Seeking to unify most social and political actors in a fight against transnational financial actors, the arrival of Néstor Kirchner embodied the promise of social and economic progress, and the fulfillment of human rights demands of social groups that lacked political representation in Argentina. Both Kirchners overtly expressed their rejection of neo-liberal policies, and their administrations ran nationalist-populist economic policies, based on the renegotiation of the external debt, increased public spending and heavy subsidies, the nationalization of businesses, distorted prices and exchange rate controls (Aytaç & Önis, 2014).
Much like all populists, the Kirchners relied on the construction of an antagonistic discourse that appealed to a range of heterogeneous group of actors and sectors, with diverse interests and demands but with similar longings for political representation. Through this discourse –directed, at first, against international financial interest, and later against domestic economic oligarchs (Osterguy and Casull, 2017)— they managed to rally a variety of groups, including organizations of antimilitarist character (such as the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), social movements and unions (piqueteros, the Evita Movement), as well as young university students and even certain business and financial sectors (Mansilla Blanco, 2005).

What was the Kirchners´ record of accomplishment in terms of social inclusion and cohesion?

In material terms, the results are mixed. When Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003, he managed to initiate a strong economic recovery and to successfully reduce the heavy financial debt burden. Taking advantage of a period of record primary materials prices, especially for soy, Argentina´s prime export, he set Argentina on course for an average 9% annual growth for the next five years. According to official statistics (INDEC), by mid-2005 poverty in Argentina had dropped to 38.5% and unemployment had fallen to 11.6%. By the end of Cristina Kirchner´s second presidency, the numbers had dropped even farther to 30.3% people living in poverty, and an unemployment rate of 6.5% (Annex 1).

The global financial crisis of 2008, the fall in the price of commodities, and Argentina´s difficulties in borrowing abroad (due to the 2001 default) complicated the economic outlook. Despite these problems, the Kirchner increased public spending and sought to encourage domestic consumption and monetary expansion. According to many economists, this caused inflation to grow to double digit rates – among the highest in the world-- after 2010, and plunged the Argentine economy back into recession in 2014 –a complex situation inherited by Argentina´s current president, Mauricio Macri, that continues to plague the South American country today.

In social terms, Kirchner-era Argentina took bold steps with a positive record in social inclusion, and citizenship rights that has left a deep imprint on the continent and had a positive impact on ideational indicators of social inclusion, as observable in Annex 1. Both Néstor and Cristina Kirchner adopted redistributive policies that became key to safeguarding popular support for their governments, and launched thirteen "government plans" aimed at the expansion of public health and education, or improving the workplace, whose names ("Hacemos Futuro!", "Programa Jefes y Jefas del Hogar", "Manos a la Obra" or "Plan Nacer Argentina") made direct references to the time of Juan Domingo Perón (Gratius, 2007). Some of these, such as the Universal Child Allowence (AUH) program, were supported by the whole political spectrum. Another achievement of Kirchnerism was the expansion of pension coverage, allowing Argentina the reach the largest pension coverage in Latin America by 2010 (ECLAC, 2012).

As part of the Kirchner´s bet on the defense of human rights, they repealed the "laws of pardon" and resumed trials against the genocide committed by the last
dictatorship, in addition to launching military restructuring and judiciary reform initiatives. Most of the military leaders were brought to trial. The Kirchner governments also gave a strong boost to groups such as Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and led the way in the region with progressive policies. In 2010, Argentina became the first country in Latin America, and the tenth in the world, to pass a law in support of same-sex marriage.

For the purpose of our analysis, the positive impact of the above policies is clearly observable in the ideational dimension indicators of social cohesion. Thus, Annex 1 shows, a relatively high perception of inclusive government (up to 24% in 2015 from 19% in 2005), and an increase in the trust in institutions (32% in 2005, 42% in 2010, and 38% in 2015) during the Kirchner years. Coupled with the positive trend in the Argentines’ perception of democracy (50% and 54% had a positive perception in 2010 and 2015, up from 33% in 2005), the improved perception of corruption (up to 3.4 in 2015 from 2.8 in 2005) and a rise in the perception of justice in the distribution of income (with a remarkable increase from 2% in 2002 to 21% by 2015) all of these indicators speak of a positive social cohesion record for the Kirchner era.

Having said this, the Kirchners showed clear authoritarian traits and concentrated power in the executive. Néstor Kirchner secured vast discretionary authority over budget decisions in 2005, abolished open primaries for the nomination of presidential candidates, and used his power to intervene with official statistical information. During Cristina Kirchner’s government, the trend continued, and increasing institutional clashes were one of the causes of the reputational and political erosion of Kirchnerism. Conflicts were most common between the executive and the judicial branches of government, and the media. Some of the strongest confrontations between the government and the courts occurred because of the approval of a new Media Law, in 2009 and the denunciation and subsequent death of the prosecutor Alberto Nisman, in 2015. This, as well as the lack of transparency around the 1994 Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, badly damaged the image of the Kirchner government, which, nevertheless, counted with approval ratings of well above 50% by the time Cristina left office in 2015, due to the inability to run for a third term, as dictated by the Argentinian constitution.

**Mexico: High Expectations for Social Transformation under AMLO**

AMLO’s landslide victory in July 2018 cannot be understood in isolation of the failures of Mexico’s two decades of democratic governments, and the long-term political and economic factors that created a fertile ground for a populist win. The old and powerful PRI ruled Mexico for 70 years, but after decades of economic turmoil, in 2000, in an example of peaceful democratic transition, gave way to an open political system, governed by the conservative PAN, under Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón, and the PRI’s Enrique Peña Nieto. For 18 years, the PRI, PAN and PRD (the social democratic party) ruled Mexico under the banner of profound economic liberalization and globalization propelled in the late 1980s, and presidential leadership revolved around keeping the status quo in domestic politics and foreign affairs, particularly in international trade. In just over three decades, Mexico had become one of the most globalized economies, as it signed 11 Foreign Trade Agreements with 46 countries,
including NAFTA, and its trade dependency tripled from 24% of its GDP in 1995 to 78% in 2017 (WB).

This economic transformation, however, came at a profound social cost, with increasing inequality and poverty rates (43.6% of the population, or over 53 million people live in poverty), and—as mentioned before—declining material and ideational indicators of social cohesion, including rampant corruption (directly involving Enrique Peña Nieto), and escalating criminal violence and weak rule of law. Figuring prominently among these problems was the perception that the country´s ruling class was unable or unwilling to deal with these problems, thus fueling the energetic anti-establishment movement embodied by AMLO. US President Donald Trump’s as well as his administration´s combative and protectionist rhetoric were other short-term drivers of AMLO´s rise as a contender.

AMLO campaigned on all of these issues, as he promised a profound transformation of Mexico. He vowed to empower the unprivileged, alleviate poverty, reduce violence, and fight corruption—most if not all of which he blamed on the political and business elite or “power mafias.” Interestingly, however—having lost two successive bids for president in 2006 and 2012 because of his radical and, according to many, Chavista language—his rhetoric now appears more moderate, and he has gone out of his way in signaling that he will govern as a pragmatic (i.e. reformist) leader, with respect to the established legal and economic framework.

Six months into his presidency, AMLO has already launched a wide array of presidential announcements, decrees, constitutional modifications, and reforms. Many involve social initiatives, aimed at providing money for youth programs, increasing pensions for the elderly, expanding higher education, increasing subsidies for small-scale farmers, launching several infrastructure projects in Mexico’s less developed Southern states (including the Tren Maya), and reducing the country’s energy dependence on the US. What remains to be seen is if, as he claims, he can achieve these objectives without creating a large budget deficit, despite falling oil revenues and sluggish economic growth. AMLO, in fact, claims he has two alternative means to guarantee budgetary health: government austerity (through the reduction of salaries and resources for senior officials), and the recovery of money lost to corruption.

On the economic front, therefore, much uncertainty remains, due also to controversial decisions including the cancellation of a US$13 billion Mexico City airport project, the construction of a refinery, and his proposal to restore dominance of two state-run energy companies, Pemex and the Federal Electricity Commission.

Having said this, AMLO enjoys high approval ratings, ranging between 60% and 86%. Much of this has to do with symbolic measures and decisions, including the closing of the President’s official residence at Los Pinos, the elimination of pensions of ex-presidents, and reduction of salaries and budget of high government officials.

As has been the case with many other populist experiments, though, one of the key concerns regarding the new administration refers to AMLO’s disregard of democratic institutions and his desire to dismantle many of the checks and balances constructed since 2000 (Dresser, 2019). To critics, AMLO’s attacks on the media, his decision to
launch a military-run National Guard to curb violence, or to award contracts directly, without competitive bids, indicate that he will recentralize powers in a single party, with a one-man rule (Ahmed & Semple, 2019) – much like was the case during the 70-year PRI rule.

Mexico, in sum, represents the latest example of the pink tide populism in Latin America; though, unlike in Venezuela and Bolivia, this populist turn assumes a more moderate, orderly, and institutionalized form. This has to do with a number of factors, including 1) AMLO’s career and history in the existing party and electoral system; 2) the make-up of AMLO’s winning coalition, Juntos haremos historia (“Together we will make history”), formed by a diverse and contradictory mix of former communists, ultra conservatives, that make it difficult to define ideologically and which is likely to have challenges acting in concert; 3) the strength of Mexico’s private sector; 4) the country’s weakened but surviving opposition parties PAN, PRI and PRD; and 5) a more vigilant civil society and press.

There is no doubt that the newly elected government has a unique opportunity to overhaul the Mexican political regime. The greatest challenge confronting the president, however, lies in the big expectations he has himself cultivated.

3.3. The Social Performance of Revolutionary Populism in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela

By their self-defining revolutionary character and discourses, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela represent a more radical type of populism compared to the two former cases. Populist leaders in all three countries promised a refoundation of the relation between state and citizen institutions and leaders. In fact, they managed to change constitutions and added new powers to the traditional triangle of executive, legislative and judicial branch: the electoral power and a moral citizen’s power. All three Constitutions included social rights, solidarity and justice as founding principles of their nations.

These constitutional and systemic political changes did not happen in the case of Argentinean or Mexican populism (although in the latter case they might occur in the future), of a more reformist approach. Another distinctive feature of revolutionary populism compared to the more reformist variant is based on the coexistence of replacement of liberal democracy by participative or direct democracy including referendums and recall-mechanisms including the Presidents.

These five elements - the discourse of a “second independence”, the promise to refound the state and its institutions, new Constitutions approved by referendum, the Revolutionary character, and the introduction of two additional powers to the three branches - distinguish radical populism from its more moderate variant in Argentina and Mexico.

Populist governments in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela promised social justice and a government of the people through their supreme leader, bypassing “corrupt” democratic institutions and replacing them by new popular organizations, including the administration of justice, education, health and other strategic sectors for social
cohesion. During Chavism (1999-2013), Venezuela represented the most radical populist transformation by changing – with the help of Cuba - all institutions and the economic foundations of the country. Meanwhile, Bolivia’s experience under Morales stands for a more bottom-up type of indigenous populism, and “Correísmo” in Ecuador continued a long tradition of populist caudillos without a clear mission. As had happened in Argentina and Mexico, political instability, social decline and exclusion was a strong motivation for the rise of left-wing populism in all three countries (Gratius & Rivero, 2018).

The social record of radical populism varies from Bolivia to Ecuador and Venezuela. The social and economic disaster in Venezuela under the post-populist Maduro regime (Anselmi, 2017) demonstrates the total failure of populism as a promise of justice, equality and inclusion. By measuring the material and ideational factors of social cohesion, Bolivia is the best performer in a context of macroeconomic growth and stability, followed by Ecuador. Bolivia and Ecuador’s records of social cohesion balances the negative outcome of Chavism or Post-Chavism, and, as we explain in the following comparative analysis, allows drawing a rather mixed conclusion in terms of social cohesion and radical populism.

The Explosive Mix of Populism and Social Decline in Venezuela

Venezuela offers the most extreme experience of populism through its creation of a dual society: first, through a discourse that divided citizens into the defenders of “the fourth” and the “fifth republic”, and then by creating a system of Bolivarian entities that coexists with traditional institutions. This division culminated, first, with the establishment of Maduro’s Constitutional Assembly, that operates as a parliament and ignores the former “Bolivarian” National Assembly, which since December 2015 is dominated by the opposition. Second, with the power struggle between self-proclaimed President Guaidó who challenges Maduro’s doubtful right to stay in power after the fraudulent presidential elections of May 2018.

In the case of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez’s leftist populism resulted in social, economic and political chaos of a dual society that could not be further away from social cohesion. All figures confirm the negative social record of the Venezuelan case: homicide rates reached a regional record; personal trust is at the lowest level ever; 10% of the population left the country between 2015-2019 (Gratius, Puente, 2019); the inflation rate has reached several millions; five years of severe recession have increased poverty rates; and basic goods like food or medicine only cover the necessities of a small minority. There is little doubt that Maduro’s performance as a successor of Chavism could not be worse. Unemployment reached 35% in 2018, the last official figure on poverty was published in 2015, when 33.1% of Venezuelans were considered poor. A study published by ENCOVI in 2018, estimated the official poverty rate in 85% of the population (ENCOVI, 2018).

These material losses had a negative impact on the ideational dimension of social cohesion. The traumatic humanitarian crisis, combined with hyperinflation and high crime rates, reduced interpersonal trust from 24% in 2010 to 9% in 2017, and trust in institutions from 55% in 2010 to 30% in 2016. The perception of social inclusion diminished by more than half between 2005 and 2017, and the evaluation of
democracy reached a historical support of only 25% in 2016, compared to 55% in 2000, one year after Chávez assumed power (Annex 1). In this case, the parallel decline of material and ideational social factors leaves little doubt about the disastrous record of post-populism (Anselmi, 2017).

Although US sanctions, since 2019 also imposed on Citgo, contribute to the severe humanitarian crisis, the disaster is home-made. Evidence can be found in the extremely high corruption rates, low productivity, high dependence (90%) of oil exports, price controls, capital flight, bad economic management and constant monetary reforms parallel to high public expenditures (Puente, 2018). Given its bad economic and social record, the government of Nicolás Maduro stopped publishing figures on the dramatic homicide rates, rising inequality, the contraction of the middle class or high poverty rates.

Maduro’s disastrous social record contrasts with a more positive outcome under Chavism (1999-2013). His Revolution or Socialism of the 21st Century represented an ideological mix between Fidel Castro’s national socialism, Simón Bolívar’s nationalism and Perón’s corporative, state-centric model of social inclusion (Gratius, 2009, p. 6). His first presidency in 1999 followed the decline of Puntofijism (the period of liberal democracy 1958-1999), and “apartheid”. During Chávez’s government, according to ECLAC, poverty rates declined by nearly half, from 41.6% in 2000 to 26.8% ten years later. The same goes for unemployment, which fell from 14% in 2000 to 8.5% in 2010. Social programs created with the support of Cuban advisers in exchange of massive oil supplies (between 90.000 and 120.000 barrels daily) improved the health and education levels in poor and marginalized areas of the country with a low presence of the state.

So-called missions³, social programs (health, education, food, basic infrastructure) created with Cuban ideational and logistical support, contributed in a positive way to social inclusion. Nonetheless, different from social cohesion, based on a pact between state and society, these programs, often executed by militaries and financed with oil revenues, had a clientelist structure and helped secure loyalty of those that benefitted from cheap food, scholarships or other measures in exchange of voting for Chávez in the following election.

Despite the declared revolutionary character of Chavism, the movement circled around the charismatic leader, and his frequent discourses and mass media programs (particularly “Aló Presidente”). The death of Chávez in Havana in 2013 and the subsequent authoritarian chaos showed that the positive social performance during the first fourteen years had been the result of extremely high oil prices, the charismatic leadership of Chávez and social programs introduced by the Cuban ally who sustained many of these policies. When the leader died, the Chavist movement weakened, became divided and sustained power by repression and authoritarian measures, against the majority of citizens and the international call for elections.

Ecuador’s “Citizens Revolution”: Inclusion with Exclusion

The poor social record of Nicolás Maduro contrasts with positive results in Ecuador, under President Rafael Correa (2007-2017), who continued a long populist tradition from José María Velásquez Ibarra in the 1950s to Abdalá Bucaram at the end of the 1990s. Rafael Correa (2007-2017), an economist with professional experience in the World Bank, was part of the left-wing ALBA-group and the Cuban-Venezuelan axis, but measured by public policies, his “Citizens Revolution” was less radical than his discourse.

Ecuador under Rafael Correa promised and proclaimed a “Citizen’s Revolution” by the empowerment of the excluded and direct democracy by referendums and recalls of political leaders by citizens, as well as the so called “Enlaces”, special programs of the President who established a direct contact with his followers. Correa’s national populism and his electoral vehicle PAIS (Patria Altiva I Soberana) promised to “replace neoliberalism by a new social pact” (de la Torre, 2018: 5). He also proclaimed a radical change of political, economic and social structures (de la Torre 2018: 8), the fight against corruption, and a moral and citizen’s revolution by the inclusion of all ethnic groups, as well as a new constitution based on the concept of Buen Vivir, developed by Alberto Acosta, Rafael Comingo, and others.

The populist government criticized but did not change the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy and introduced social and infrastructure programs financed by the state. Similar to Bolivia, under the populist government of Correa, Ecuador combined macroeconomic stability with social programs and the rise of social expenditures to compensate the losers of capitalism without any structural economic changes.

In political terms, Correa’s ten years in government revealed increasing conflicts with the opposition and in his own lines. Regarding the latter, the indigenous movement and organization CONAIE demanded more participation and rights and began to criticize power concentration in the hands of the president. Despite authoritarian measures like the control of the opposition and not like-minded media, the social balance of Correismo evidences positive results, compared to former governments. Compared to Bolivia, the best social performer within radical populism, the social output of populism in Ecuador is less impressive, but also positive in ideational and material terms. Long-standing development plans and social programs like “Bono de Desarrollo Humano (Human Development Bonus)” or “Less poverty more development”, combined with populist projects such as “Misión Ternura” or “Mis Mejores Años” or additional funds for disabled or retirees contributed to a substantial reduction of the poverty rate: from 32.8% in 2010 to 23.2% in 2017, despite a declining economic growth rate that stagnated at 1.1% in 2018 (see annex 1). Homicide rates reached a level of 5.9 (per 100000 inhabitants), which are even lower than in Bolivia. Public investment in infrastructure, including new schools and hospitals, contributed to the long-term goal of social cohesion. The Gini coefficient of inequality also improved by 0.4 points (from 0.49 in 2010 to 0.45 in 2017), and unemployment remains below 4% of the active population.

Not only the material but also the ideational factors of social cohesion illustrate a positive balance: Despite low levels, interpersonal trust increased by 6% in the period
2010-2017, as well as trust in institutions (28% in 2010, and 46% in 2016), and the perception of democracy rose by 3% from 2010 and 2017. Corruption remains at relatively low levels, like those of Bolivia (3.2 in 2017). Consequently, citizens perceived a clear improvement in terms of justice and redistribution of income (from only 34% in 2010 to 54% in 2015).

These data reveal a positive social record of Rafael Correa’s presidency. Nonetheless, the idealistic development model of “Buen Vivir”, based on social rights guaranteed by the Constitution, was not implemented (Acevedo Rodríguez & Valentini Negrini, 2017). Sustainable development as the main pillar of Buen Vivir clashed with large infrastructure projects in indigenous areas or the continuation of the extractive model of oil exploration. To impose these neoliberal policies, the government of Correa “coopted and divided the social movements” to avoid massive protests (Acevedo Rodríguez & Valentini Negrini, 2017, p. 12). Social policies followed the traditional model of charity under the control of public administration and the president (Acevedo Rodríguez & Valentini Negrini, 2017, p. 8). Structural social changes did not happen. For example, agriculture: in contrast to a slow decline of inequality, the concentration of land remained high: 5% of the population owns 52% of agriculture area (Acevedo Rodríguez & Valentini Negrini, 2017, p. 7).

Compared to Venezuela, Rafael Correa’s attempt to change the constitution and to present himself for a new presidential mandate in 2017 failed. Accusations of corruption against him and members of his cabinet contributed to declining support for his reelection, and he finally renounced to be a presidential candidate. Finally, his party’s official candidate Lenin Moreno won Presidential elections. After 2017, the country experienced the opposite transformation from leftist populism to social democracy under Moreno, who dismantled authoritarian measures (like the control of the media) and returned to liberal democracy with a strong social compromise as a positive heritage of Correa’s years in government. Nonetheless, he maintained the social compromise and high public expenditures to reduce inequality and poverty as the two main development challenges the country faces.

**Bolivia’s Indigenous Revolution: Positive Social Record and Authoritarian Temptation**

Bolivia is the most prominent example for a peaceful indigenous revolution that started in 2006, when Evo Morales won his first presidential election, backed by a broad popular support and an indigenous movement that identified him with structural changes. Morales initiated a long political cycle of economic and political stability at the price of a power struggle between movement and leader, on one side, and populist regime and opponents, on the other (Mayorga, 2017).

As opposed to Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela, populism in Bolivia is not top-down and mainly limited to the leader, but a bottom-up political movement that remains stronger than in other countries. The increasing distance between movement and leader is one of the reasons why Evo Morales lost the referendum on February 21st, 2016, when he failed by a margin of 51.3% to 48.7% to change the constitution that prohibits a fourth mandate and, thus, his candidacy for presidential elections in 2019. Nonetheless, in December 2018, the self-created Supreme Electoral Court
decided in favor of his candidacy. The use of loyal institutions for maneuvers against
democratic rules is shared by all populists.

Bolivia under Evo Morales joined the ALBA-group and participated in South-South cooperation. Populist discourse had a strong identity approach by claiming the return to the ancient indigenous traditions against a colonial model of governance that was strongly criticized by Evo Morales (following his example, the Mexican President AMLO choose a similar discourse and recently asked the Spanish government to publicly apologize for its colonial past). Similar to Ecuador under Correa, Bolivia’s populist government adopted the indigenous concept of “Buen Vivir” and included it in a new constitution, approved in 2009, that reconciled the indigenous cosmovision with republican ideas of former governments.

The temptation to maintain and concentrate power brings Evo Morales closer to authoritarian or caudillo-like political leaders that claim to represent and defend the people’s true sovereignty. The creation of vertical power structures around the executive or charismatic leader, by concentrating electoral, legislative and judicial power in the hands of the governing elite, is a practice of exclusion and polarization which clearly opposes the idea of social cohesion –a notion that necessarily needs a political consensus or pact between state and citizens. Nevertheless, Morales and his political party and movement MAS represent a new form of ethno-nationalism that empowered indigenous groups and gave them rights and a voice (Mayorga, 2017).

Justice as part of social cohesion has been particularly important in Bolivia’s populism. As opposed to Ecuador and Venezuela, the government of Evo Morales created for the first time a direct election of judges and magistrates by citizens. Nonetheless, the high abstention rate at the two electoral processes confirmed the limited interest or acceptance of Bolivians.

In the case of Bolivia, despite authoritarian discourses, polarization and conflict between leader and movement and between populism and opposition (Gratius & Rivero, 2018), the government’s social record is better than in the other four cases we have examined. First, the political inclusion of the indigenous groups and the attempt, through higher social expenditures and new programs like “Renta Digna” or “Bolivia Digna”, to reduce asymmetries between ethnic groups and between the two major territories of the country, represent a clear case of social cohesion through empowerment and participation.

Surveys (see Annex 1) confirmed the positive record of social cohesion in terms of perception of inclusive government, which improved by 9% between 2005 and 2018, as well as the score on redistribution that increased from 13% in 2002 to 48% in 2015. Additionally, the evaluation of democracy that had reached extremely low levels the year before Morales came to power (25%) improved notably, reaching 38% in 2015 and 28% in 2016. The ideational dimension of social inclusion had been complemented by material gains: as explained in Annex 1, in 2005, poverty affected 59,6% of the population and was reduced to 36,4% in 2017; the GINI coefficient on inequality improved from 0.59 to 0.44 in the same period; inflation reached only 2.3% in 2018; unemployment was reduced by half, from 8.1% to 4%; and growth rates have remained stable and above 4% in the last twenty years.
Despite these positive developments, unlike Ecuador, the maintenance of capitalism and an extractive economy based on national resources (gas) provoked a divorce and disenchantment between the government of Evo Morales and social movements. It also conspired against the idealist concept of “Buen Vivir” as a new sustainable model of development opposing the dominant capitalist consumption and accumulation (Lo Brutto & Aceves López, 2017, p. 167). The paradox between the indigenous revolution represented by Evo Morales and the maintenance of macroeconomic stability and extractive industries created unexpected tensions between the new and the classical model of development and increased internal opposition against a president who decided, against popular will, to present his candidacy for a fourth mandate.
4. Conclusion: The Mixed Social Balance of Populism in Latin America

The brief overview of the interdependence between social cohesion and left populism in theory and political practice evidences the hegemonic character of populism in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela. The binary, divisive and exclusionary approach of populism (enemies vs. friends, followers vs. opponents, people vs. elite, etc.) stands in clear opposition to the mostly European idea of social cohesion by democratic practices of negotiation and dialogue which are mainly absent in populist governments.

Populist discourses and the “us vs. them” vision of politics, which favors confrontation over consensus, is clearly opposed to the original European idea of “cohesive societies”, adopted from the mid-2000s as a paradigm of development by ECLAC. The populist tradition of blaming former elites and their obsession with identifying internal and external “enemies” as well as the justification of repressive measures against these “threats” from the inside or outside clearly conspire against political and social cohesion. Nonetheless, the positive social record of radical populism in Bolivia and Ecuador—which combined structural political and social changes, and a prominent role of the state as a development agent with macroeconomic stability and capitalism—prove that populism can be a corrective of social decline and inequality.

In all five cases, the third wave of populist leaders came to power as a consequence of the poor results of liberal democracies in terms of social cohesion. Indeed, apart from the two best cases Costa Rica and Uruguay, and despite ECLAC’s and EU’s effort to push the concept, social cohesion is mostly absent in Latin American societies. High degrees of exclusion of indigenous and marginalized groups in Bolivia and Ecuador are the main reasons for the rise of Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. Similar lessons can be drawn for Argentina after the financial breakdown, Mexico before AMLO, and Venezuela at the end of Puntofijism. Latin American political systems are predominantly presidential, centered on strong individual leaders. In addition, populist leaders belong to the strongest political actors, sometimes obtaining more than 50% of votes, thus receiving a direct mandate from the people to govern.

While the social reasons for the electoral success of populism and their discourses of inclusion are clear, the social record of populism in power is more ambiguous. The social performance of populism in Bolivia and Ecuador is positive, mixed in Argentina and uncertain in Mexico. Venezuela clearly is the worst-case scenario, revealing the dark side of populism, as it turned into chaotic authoritarianism under the civil-military regime of Nicolás Maduro since 2013. In sum, given the mixed social balance of populist governments in these five countries, leftist populists are hardly better than social democrats (for example in Brazil under Lula or social democratic governments in Costa Rica, and Uruguay) when it comes to social cohesion.
In contrast with social democrats, leftist populist discourses tend to divide between rich and poor instead of creating cohesive societies. In all five cases, social results come at a cost to democracy (concentration of power, top-down policies and polarization between followers and “enemies”) and, consequently, costs for social cohesion, based on harmonic and not divided societies: “to maintain an alliance with social basis, it is not enough to distribute the income in the best possible way, but also to distribute power” (Lo Brutto & Aceves López, 2017, p. 175). In none of the five case studies, did populist governments share power, but rather they tried to impose unilateral decisions taken by presidents.

Four out of five cases proved that populism pushed social progress, but at the expense of authoritarianism and political control by the leader. Given the deep social cleavages and extreme inequalities in most Latin American societies, they cannot be compared with much more cohesive European countries. It is not necessarily populism that divides and polarizes; rather, preexisting deep political and social divisions bring populism to power, generating high expectations for the populist leaders to impose a social agenda of change against a former political elite which is equated with high corruption rates, neoliberal economic policies and low levels of distribution and social policies. This has been the case of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela before populist leaders came to power.

In this sense, populism promises to respond to those situations through a leader who does not need to negotiate with his/her opponents, and who is strong enough to impose his/her agenda against the former elite. Nonetheless, the costs of populist social inclusions are high: Using democratic means, they all too often seek to concentrate power through new constitutions, take control of the media, the legislative and judicial branches of government, and perpetuate their rule by using electoral reforms, nepotism, and the suspension of constitutional guarantees. Thus, they gradually abandon the path of direct democracy by citizen’s control which they had promised at the beginning of their mandates.

All five cases revealed that populism does not promote social cohesion in a European sense of harmonious and peaceful societies with high welfare standards. Nonetheless, particularly Bolivia’s and Ecuador’s social performance under populist governments prove the progress made on reducing poverty rates, improving the Gini coefficient of equality, and citizen’s empowerment and participation.

With the exception of Venezuela, where the humanitarian crisis evidences the failure of social improvements by populism or, under the Maduro government, the transformation from charismatic populism to chaotic authoritarianism (Ayuso & Gratius, 2018), left-wing populism has been a political formula for social and political change by including the poor and marginalized (including the indigenous people) into society and politics.

Even globally speaking, it is undeniable that leftist populism has understood and for many provides the only real alternative to an entirely new economic context and party landscape, completely transformed by thirty years of neoliberal policies. Unless other social democratic parties address the same real issues and demands, we might witness the rise of more leftist populist movements in the future.
5. Bibliography


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Table 1: The material and ideational dimension of populism: comparing cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATERIAL DIMENSION</th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inflation (IMF)</td>
<td>-0,8% 8,9% 10,1% 2,7% -2,5%</td>
<td>2,5% 4,4% 4,1% 4,9% 4,3%</td>
<td>1,1% 5,3% 3,5% 0,0% 1,1%</td>
<td>4,9% 2,3% 5,1% 3,3% 2,0%</td>
<td>3,7% 10,3% -1,5% -6,2% -180,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (IMF)</td>
<td>17,1% 11,6% 7,8% 6,5% 9,2%</td>
<td>7,5% 8,1% 4,4% 4,4% 4,0%</td>
<td>7,6% 7,1% 5,0% 4,8% 3,7%</td>
<td>2,2% 3,5% 5,3% 4,4% 3,3%</td>
<td>14,0% 12,2% 8,5% 7,4% 35,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (WB)</td>
<td>NA NA NA 30,3% (2015) 25,7% (2017)</td>
<td>NA 59,6 51,3% (2009) 38,6% 36,4% (2017)</td>
<td>NA NA 32,8% 23,3% 23,2%</td>
<td>NA NA 46,1% 46,2% (2014) 43,6% (2017)</td>
<td>41,6% 42,4 26,8% 33,1% NA</td>
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<td>Size of the middle class (Pew)</td>
<td>32,5% (2011)</td>
<td>18,6% (2011)</td>
<td>21,1% (2011)</td>
<td>25,7% (2011)</td>
<td>29,5% (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GINI (WB)</td>
<td>0,51 0,48 0,43 0,41 (2014) 0,41 (2017)</td>
<td>0,62 0,59 0,49 (2009) 0,47 0,44 (2017)</td>
<td>0,56 0,53 0,49 0,46 0,45 (2017)</td>
<td>0,51 0,49 0,45 0,46 (2014) 0,43 (2016)</td>
<td>0,48 (1999) 0,52 NA NA NA</td>
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<td>Homicide rates (per 100,000) (WB)</td>
<td>7,3 (1999) NA NA 6,5 5,9 (2016)</td>
<td>NA 5,2 12,8 6,3 6,3 (2016)</td>
<td>14,5 15,4 17,6 6,5 5,9 (2016)</td>
<td>10,6 9,1 22,0 16,5 19,3</td>
<td>32,8 37,2 45,1 53,8 (2012) NA</td>
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<td>Proportion of seats of women in natl. parliament (ECLAC)</td>
<td>26,5% 36,2% 28,5% 35,8% 38,9%</td>
<td>11,5% 16,9% 25,4% 53,1% 53,1%</td>
<td>14,6% 16,0% 32,3% 41,6% 38,0%</td>
<td>16,0% 24,2% 26,2% 42,4% 48,2%</td>
<td>NA 17,4% 17,0% 17,0% 22,2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Ideational Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interpersonal Trust (Latinobarómetro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Perception of Inclusive Government (Latinobarómetro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Trust in Institutions (ECLAC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Perception of Democracy (Positive) (Latinobarómetro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Corruption (CPI/TI) (Score 1-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>2,7</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>3,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>3,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>3,3</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>2,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Perception of Justice of Distribution of Income (ECLAC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>4% (1997)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>2% (2002)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>8% (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>15% (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>21% (2002)</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18% (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sense of Belonging/Identity (Feel Discriminated) (ECLAC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>