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## Populist Transition: The Cases of Venezuela and Ecuador

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ALBERTO MARESCA, APR 15 2024

The purpose of this paper is not to resume Venezuela and Ecuador's recent political history. Instead, the focus is on the transfer of populist leadership in both countries. Although the shared ideology by Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro could suggest a more obvious link in the Venezuelan example, the fact that Rafael Correa and Daniel Noboa are opposite paradigms does not exclude their common populism. Factors like the periods in which the four leaders governed are essential to understanding how populism is an evolving categorization that should not be reduced to its classic connotations. Despite not sharing the tradition of classical populism, this paper recognizes the maintained presence of some of its definitions, being an abnormal phenomenon constructed into the mixture of social and economic development in the case of Latin America (Morán, 2021, p. 32). However, I argue that populism's capacity depends on its social, political, and geographic context. In other words, in the Global North, populism can indeed be an abnormal political experiment that does not fit into a pure liberal tradition. Hence, Trump or Boris Johnson are the exception, not the rule.

Instead, I consider that in Latin America, and to the extent beyond this paper's scope, populism is the rule and not the exception in the whole Global South. As Prof. Matias Spektor pointed out during our class on November 10, 2023, problems like corruption can be defined as "endemic" in countries like Brazil. At the same level, I propose that populism is indeed "endemic" in Latin America as well. Authors like Ocampo (2021, p. 5) claim that, in the case of Argentina, populism started to be "endemic" after the first government of Juan Domingo Perón. "Endemic populism" can be defined as the reiterated popular acceptance of populist leaders who, in their ambitious promises and oral rhetoric, are supported by the voters in a specific country. Thus, "endemic populism" is a social and not political categorization for analyzing political leadership. National contexts are extremely relevant for having "endemic populism" because of the failures of a given state in addressing popular demands over time. If the state does not provide representativity, participation, and goods to its people, then often a messianic and populist savior will follow. With his Weberian charisma (1918), the strong man is always seen as an electoral attraction because of the institutions' lack of credibility. Chávez and Correa's charismatic legitimacy makes them appropriate for the classic categorization of populism. Their successful but polarizing terms were also the reason for subsequent leaders to embrace populist practices. Society favored politicians that, with their own populism, countered, in the case of Noboa, the predecessor Correa or emulated him, as per Maduro and Chávez. For sure, here, the meaning of predecessor does not stick with its chronological connotation but is related to the political weight that, for Moreno and Lasso in Ecuador, can be considered very limited. Maduro can be seen as a direct continuator of Chávez's populist leadership, while Noboa differed, in its ideological base, from Correa. Noboa evolved a different kind of populism linked with the current social and political landscape heavily affected by social media in Ecuador.

It is also essential to note that Venezuela and Ecuador's last years had experiences that varied in their responsiveness to liberal democracy. Factors such as inherited economic mismanagement and persistent antagonism between political and social actors across left and right wings are among the reasons why respect for liberal democracy is not the key to this analysis on populism in Venezuela and Ecuador. Both countries can be identified as delegative democracies, according to O'Donnell's definition (1994). For drawing a more complete framework for the relationship between Venezuela and Ecuador's populism and democracy, the following section will be relevant.

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## Brief Categorization for Democracy in Venezuela and Ecuador

In this paper, democracy is not labeled as per its liberal significance. Instead, it is more appropriate here to consider democracy for its universalistic values. Authors inspired by the magnificent works of Enrique Dussel, such as Demenchonok, offer a perfect definition of democracy that fits into the spirit of this work. Please note that the categorization for democratization that will follow should be analyzed through sociological and philosophical lenses more than strictly political ones. Demenchonok (2017, p. 14) defines a typology of participatory democracy focused on equality: "Democratic cosmopolitics from below, defined first and foremost by the efforts of the political actors themselves to overcome the obstacles to freedom and equality." Therefore, the key to democracy is the relationship between populism, with its varieties, and the search for a democratic rule based on economic, social, and political equality. Demenchonok's democracy certainly does not apply to rigid respect for the rule of law and institutions. In fact, populism itself is not an ally for checks and balances. Hence, in the case studied here, populism and democracy should not be perceived as an oxymoron.

Instead, the argument is that one of the reasons for the proliferation of populism in Venezuela and Ecuador is the weakness of liberal democracy in providing popular participation. Moreover, specifically in the case of Noboa, the current crisis in Ecuador outlined that democratic ruling is not the priority for local voters. *Corporación Latinobarómetro* (2023, p. 24) showed that Ecuadorian voters are among the less interested in Latin America in terms of preference for democracy as the best form of government.[1]

For Noboa, the point in this paper cannot refer to his actual ruling, given the recent election. The populist traits of Noboa are present in his electoral campaign despite having features quite different from the average notion of populism. He is not fully comparable with Correa because of a large difference in charismatic rhetoric. A different discourse should be drawn for Venezuela. Whatever one can think about the Bolivarian Revolution, there are two main points on political leadership that could be unanimously agreed on. First, since 1998, in Venezuela, the main political signpost has been the search for economic equality, which means wider access to social justice for the lower classes. For example, Venezuela was the most equal Latin American country from 2012 to 2015 (Goodfriend, 2023). On the other hand, Venezuela lives in a situation of "pernicious polarization" (Somer & McCoy, 2019, p. 10), which directly results from long-standing populism.

Starting with Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan political system can be identified as under "endemic populism", whether from the left or the right. The Venezuelan political arena nowadays makes populism necessary for all political actors if they seek consensus and legitimacy. Moderate positions, or technocratic leadership, are, at the moment, something outside of the reality for Venezuelan voters. People's continuous attraction to populist leaders directly results from Chávez's leadership and impact. If *Chavismo* only knew populism in its daily political life, the same could be said about the Venezuelan opposition. Now, since the argument of this paper is related to the continuation of populist practices between Chávez and Maduro, let me describe how a populist transition takes place by looking closely at Venezuela.

## Change and Continuity in Venezuela's Populist Transition

If there is a place on earth that served as a laboratory for populism, that one is Venezuela. Chávez, Maduro, and other actors from the opposition have played in the same populist arena. In 2013, after the death of President Chávez, it was clear that populism would be "endemic" for any figure interested in Venezuelan politics. To better analyze the Venezuelan case, Will Grant's *Populista: The Rise of Latin America's 21st Century Strongman* (2021) is extremely helpful. Grant offers a solid consideration of the implications of Chávez's leadership in Venezuela, specifically about how the polarization has been generated, created, or countered, depending on what one thinks of Chávez. Grant's ability to portray Chávez's messianism is interesting for comprehending how Maduro substantially inherited a debt to pay toward the electorate. Because of Chávez's outstanding rhetoric, capacity to verbally tackle any sort of challenge, and his political creativity, Maduro was expected to do the same, or at the least be able to sell it with a similar charisma. Grant talks about Venezuela's polarization in the following way:

Venezuela is a stark warning of what can happen when vanity and dogma outweigh pragmatism and common sense.

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Of when political polarization becomes so vicious that neither side will work with their opponents on the most basic questions of human necessity. Of valuing loyalty above all else, even when it means ignoring blatant cases of incompetence, corruption and greed”.

Grant (2021, p. 73)

Therefore, Grant's description of the negative effects of polarization in Venezuela is absolutely accurate. Another element of populist continuity from Chávez is this same denial of dialogue with the opposition and the demonization of the political rival. However, Maduro not only inherited certain conditions from Chávez but also received violent and antagonistic leadership from the opposition on his desk. One of the truths about populism is that it cannot work without a similar populist response on the other side of the river. Populist leaders do need a populist opposition in order to find legitimacy.

Hence, what happened in Venezuela is a scenario of “endemic populism” in which Maduro followed a pre-existent formula for political leadership, which, with time, evolved into the current tradition for Venezuelan politics. The populist transition in Venezuela was only a change of political actors in the same political context experienced between 1998 and 2013. A key element for the study of Chávez and Maduro in their political leadership is, of course, the shared ideology. A joint ideological base between the predecessor and follower is a pillar for populist transition because populism is almost transferred in an automatic form. To make it more straightforward, when a given leadership style is venerated and ideologically appreciated by the leader that follows the founding populist, Chávez, in this case, then populism is the only known form through which the follower, Maduro, can formulate policies.

When a populist transition goes smoothly with political leaders who resemble each other, it is a continuation of criticism as well. Let me compare other examples from Chávez and Maduro for better comprehension. In Latin America, specifically in Colombia but also in other countries, one of the most traditional characteristics of local politics is the so-called “*Delfinismo*” (Ávalos, 2002). Ávalos (2002, p. 1) defines “*Delfinismo*” as “the political power inherited by the children from their parents, parents who for obvious reasons are up there”. Undoubtedly, this definition can seem too connected with the early post-colonial era in Latin America.

Nowadays, we could say that “*Delfinismo*” is the designation by a given political leader for his successor, hence, a *Delfin*. It comes with little surprise that one of the most recent political “*Delfinismo*” cases happened exactly in Colombia. Former President Iván Duque provides the perfect example of a *Delfin* on the opposite side of the political spectrum than Maduro, designated by the Colombian right-wing leader Álvaro Uribe (Lagos, 2018, p. 11).[2] Hence, populist transition through designation is not correlated to a specific political ideology and is not forcedly consecutive. A political leader can bless the future candidacy of a politician by designating him in a forward-looking perspective and not for taking power immediately.

More generally, *Delfin* is usually a politician who has closely collaborated with the leader, showing an impressive degree of loyalty almost in a religious manner. This loyalty earns him the designation of leader, sometimes because the predecessor, as in the case of Chávez, is facing severe illness. As mentioned, the practice of designating a successor is among the strongest Latin American traditions in political leadership. Thinking about Chávez's transfer of populism and leadership to Maduro, his *Delfin*, the methodology of this and other similar political designations is similar to the Mexican “*dedazo*.” Levitsky and Murillo provide the following definition for “*dedazo*”:

...An informal institution in which sitting presidents unilaterally chose their successor from a select pool of candidates (cabinet members) who obeyed a set of clear rules (to abstain from campaigning, mobilizing supporters, or attacking rivals, for example, and to publicly support the eventual nominee). Outgoing presidents would then retire from political life. The *dedazo* shaped leadership succession in Mexico for half a century and contributed in an important way to the stability of Mexico's formal, but weakly enforced, electoral regime”.

Levitsky & Murillo (2013, pp. 102-103)

With all the differences between Mexico's PRI and *Chavismo* in Venezuela, it is, after all, possible to claim that

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Chávez's appointment of Maduro went through some sort of "*dedazo*". This direct transfer of populist leadership saw an election that carried, as anticipated in this section, a transfer of negative accountability as well. When the populist transition is ideologically homogenous, there are positive and negative outcomes for the subsequent leader. As in the case of Maduro, populism was not the only aspect that Chávez transferred to him, which is a fundamental issue given the level of polarization present now in Venezuela, which is different from what will be described for Ecuador. The positive element of the Chávez-Maduro populist transition was the automatic ideological legitimacy that the current president of Venezuela received from Chávez, mainly in the eyes of those popular sectors that supported early *Chavismo*. Still, regarding the positive outcomes of this populist transition, Maduro received from Chávez two critical sources of populist legitimacy that are essential in Venezuela: international projection and military approval.

On international projection, a clarification is mandatory. The essence is that Maduro received from Chávez an efficient populist international appeal that followed the *Chavista* model in its alliance with non-Western actors. Although Maduro did not have the charismatic legitimacy of Chávez for leading major international initiatives previously built, which started to vanish, he kept Venezuela's international role in promoting a multipolar world order. Of course, the transition brought the same international allies and enemies as the United States. Maduro's populism in foreign policy, especially towards the US, was even higher than during Chávez's terms. The political discourse, enhanced by economic sanctions and the presence of Donald Trump, had a more confrontational style and populist appeal in blaming Washington for the majority of domestic issues. Therefore, national and international conditions can lead followers to increase populism compared to their predecessors. On this point, the work of Romero and Mijares deserves attention:

Venezuelan foreign policy under Chávez also carried out an internal legitimacy function, which pushed for a constant interaction with the international sphere. This created a paradoxical situation for his successor: Maduro states his legitimacy on the fidelity to the model inherited from his predecessor, and that includes the objectives and execution mechanisms of the country's foreign policy. But the domestic and international conditions, as we have already said, are different, making the continuity of the 'Chávez's doctrine' a toxic necessity for Maduro's foreign policy."

Romero & Mijares (2016, p. 190)

As the authors point out, in foreign policy, Maduro did not search for a different type of legitimacy in the international arena. Rather, the populist transition forced Maduro to religiously follow, with absolute loyalty, the international project of Bolivarian Venezuela. For this reason, at least in the international dimension, Maduro did not necessarily opt for a populist register. Instead, Maduro reproduced an already-established populist political system, whose *modus operandi* was to keep Chávez's international formula intact. If Maduro's total respect for Chávez's international procedure earned him legitimacy toward the ideological allies (Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, Russia), it also directly transferred the same critiques made against Chávez himself. This was not particularly evident in foreign policy since Maduro's international opponents were more interested in Maduro's domestic governance than in his similarities with Chávez. Apart from the described international dimension, the most apparent instance in which the Venezuelan populist transition has directly transferred legitimacy is the relationship between the state and the military.

It is widely known that, given his own background, Chávez's leadership had a strong linkage with the military. The Venezuelan army played a major role in strengthening Chávez's populism and defending him during crises like the *golpe* of 2002. Despite being far from the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning that President Maduro seems to hold a robust legitimacy in the eyes of the Venezuelan army, being considered a guardian of the emancipatory values of Bolívar and Chávez.[3] I suggest that Maduro is also a defender of the same populist traits that can even be reconnected, for Venezuela, to Simón Bolívar, proof that populism is a long-standing presence for political leadership in Venezuela. Negatively, it is in the internal sphere, inside Venezuela, where the populist analogies between Chávez and Maduro transferred to the current president, the same criticism that was delivered to his predecessor. Metaphorically, Maduro immediately started to owe the debts Chávez had toward certain sectors of the Venezuelan society, such as the opposition and the higher classes. Both internationally and nationally, Chávez inaugurated the "endemic populism" that left Maduro with no other choice. This statement does not remove Maduro from his mistakes or responsibilities. The point is that Maduro had no alternative, if not to pursue the "endemic populism" that became

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the normality for Venezuelan politics.

Let me briefly include some small insights on the debts Chávez owed to Venezuela's higher classes. Guillermoprieto (2005a) demonstrated in her work the level of identification, or hate, present in Venezuela during Chávez. In *The Gambler*, Guillermoprieto portrays the effects of Chávez's social initiatives: *Barrio Adentro*, *Misión Milagro*, and others. Those policies, which could not be more populist, had different impacts depending on people's social and economic class. In the poorest neighborhoods of Caracas, the missions were a winning gamble for *Chavismo's* popular legitimacy, while in the upper areas of the Venezuelan capital, the perception was and still is about an attempt at "welfarism" or "*asistencialismo*" (Guillermoprieto, 2005a, p. 2).

Populist transition, when ideologically connected, can pose a difficult dilemma for the political leader who follows. In the next case of Ecuador, we will see that the ideological difference between Correa and Noboa prevents the newly elected president from inheriting the critiques previously attached to *Correísmo*. For Maduro, the complications that Venezuela faced throughout his terms were accompanied by antagonisms inherited from Chávez. López Maya (2023, p. 95) is among the scholars prone to draw these analogies between Chávez and Maduro, stating that Maduro's authoritarian leadership is a direct consequence of Chávez's undermining of Venezuela's checks and balances through his prioritized charismatic legitimacy, instead of balanced democratic leadership. Again, the purpose here is not to remove Maduro's responsibility for his errors or the critiques received. Instead, it is an attempt to understand how impactful Chávez's image for his successor was. Having solid shoulders with the blessing of a charismatic populist can drive advantages and disadvantages. People and international actors can see the successor as a legitimate continuator for the previously initiated project. At the same time, detractors will hardly change their minds about separating the new leadership from the previous.

As populism is transferred from one leader to another with designation, blessing, or "*dedazo*," the same cannot be said about charisma. In the specific case of Venezuela, there are consequences of "endemic populism" that demand non-transferable skills for political leadership. First, although this paper does not assume that "endemic populism" improves liberal democracy, it is arguable that there is an improvement in horizontal accountability for the leader. In other words, populism makes the leader much more accountable, obligating him to always consider his supporters as well as have a strategy to manage the opposition. Popular participation, or horizontal democracy, is the result of a populist system in which both government and opposition are forced to completely involve their respective sectors of society. This is the reason why popular mobilization has become a regular aspect of Venezuelan horizontal democracy. In the worst-case scenario, mobilization caused by horizontal democracy can reach harsh levels of violence, as it sadly took place in Venezuela.

During our course, we have seen that it is impossible to have a perfect leader, not in Latin America nor in the rest of the world. Populism is, in its synthesis, the ideal ingredient for participatory and horizontal democracy, with all its cons. Chávez and Maduro represent leaders who, in no case, promoted commitment to the rule of law or to the codification of liberal democracy. Their case is interesting in that it shows the limits and possibilities of populist transition. When ideology is shared, some aspects walk smoothly from one leader to another. The biggest effort for the follower happens once his personality does not have the same strength as his predecessor. Chávez made policies through rhetoric and charisma more than planning. Maduro lacked the same charismatic legitimacy as Chávez, and because of the problems generated by his weak charisma, the current president is using social media for charismatic legitimacy. His broadcasted program *Con Maduro +* is an emulation of Chávez's *Aló Presidente*, but it does not have the same appeal that Guillermoprieto (2005b, p. 1) described: "Chávez is indisputably fascinating, and often even endearing when he takes over the airwaves".

## Ecuador: The Populist Transition Will Be Televised

There is no populism without the media. If, in Venezuela, both Chávez and Maduro used media as a policy, something similar can be said about Ecuador. Allow me to address some traits of Ecuador's populism. In Ecuador, populism has been more discontinuous than in Venezuela, but, with nuances, it is possible to claim that in Ecuador as well, populism is "endemic". In Ecuador, the populist transition went through a process different from that in Venezuela for two reasons. Firstly, given the absence of a Venezuela-like level of polarization, Ecuador's populism is

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much more connected with media use than core politics. Secondly, Ecuador's most recent populist transition has not been consecutive. Still, regarding the differences with Venezuela's populist transition, the Ecuadorian case can appear less obvious. There is general consensus about the populist characterization of former President Rafael Correa. However, it can seem more complicated to label Daniel Noboa as a populist precisely. This is, in sum, the purpose of this section. It could be helpful to draw specific clarifications before diving into Ecuador's different but still "endemic populism". The two leaders studied here in the case of Ecuador, Rafael Correa and Daniel Noboa, are ideologically, personally, and politically on two different poles.

Despite the evident differences, there are events that led Noboa, a moderate personality, to embrace some populist traits in his presidential campaign. For sure, this work does not assume that Noboa's presidency will be shaped by populism because only time will reveal the nature of Noboa's leadership. The paper instead argues that Noboa campaigned as a modern, digital populist, different from Latin America's Pink Tide, but it does not mean that his government will be a populist one. As the former Governor of New York, Mario Cuomo said: "Campaign in Poetry, Govern in Prose" (Waldman, 2010). In order to properly describe the populist transition from Correa to Noboa, it is essential to resume the populist features of *Correísmo*. In the Ecuadorian context, we can identify Correa's leadership as a classic populism. De la Torre (2016, p. 8) points out that populist logic creates polarized political identities through antagonism, even in the social dimension.

It is clear that Correa perfectly followed the populist formula outlined by de la Torre. What de la Torre may miss about Correa, but was true for the other cases he studied (Chávez and Evo Morales), is that Correa did not aim to destroy institutional order. Correa inserted institutionalized populism inside the Ecuadorian political system, normalizing certain populist practices that Noboa later had to utilize to win the elections. More precisely, there are aspects that Correa used during his government that were replicated, with another interpretation, by Noboa. The Ecuadorian populist transition has been partial, and it saw populism itself modifying its characteristics according to historical time and politics. Political campaigns are also instances of generating "endemic populism," and Rafael Correa is no exception in that. Conaghan (2008) effectively outlines the immediate political feelings caused by Correa's electoral victory, suggesting that Correa, even after entering the Carondelet Palace, kept the mediatic show on, thanks to his rhetorical ability. Even if Noboa does not hold Correa's charisma, he seems to have learned from Correa how to flourish in a more technocratic, pragmatic, and moderate style during public speaking. Still about Correa's communicative leadership, the following description is quite relevant:

"From the start of his presidency, Correa clearly grasped the necessity of using the office as a bully pulpit for shaping public opinion and advancing his agenda for the constituent assembly. Correa has emerged as Ecuador's version of the "great communicator" --a leader who skillfully conveys popular, commonsense messages by means of a persona that appeals to a wide spectrum of the public".

Conaghan, 2008, pp. 52-53

Correa's political leadership is interesting, given the interventions offered by Noboa until now. Both leaders, in their "permanent campaign" (Conaghan, 2008, p. 52), have focused on the discourse as a central policy, but for different reasons and motivations. Correa permanently campaigned because of his Manichean political struggle built on a binomial linkage between him and *el pueblo* under Chávez's tutoring. Hence, to maintain active political and social confrontation, Correa had to communicate continuously for the sake of countering media opposition and oligarchy, his main enemies.[4] Noboa's motivations for adopting a populist discourse are not related to the presence of political or media opposition. Correa-backed candidate Luisa González was a soft-handed rival for Noboa, and Ecuador's mainstream press seemed to smile at the presence of a new young, pragmatic, and forward-looking president. Noboa's priority is the struggle against criminality. Before actually delivering results on the insecurity matter, Noboa finds himself obliged to populistically sell solutions to Ecuador's insecurity that do not seem realistic. This is the most traditional of the features of Latin America's populist political leadership.

However, a limitedly better definition of the populist analogies between Correa and Noboa comes from Abril Tobar's "*populismo discursivo*" (Abril Tobar, 2022, p. 13) defined as a political strategy for reaching office thanks to an oral capacity that the leader uses for channeling voters' attention. A populist discourse can only work if inserted in a

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populist national context. In other words, “endemic populism” is necessary for creating a political mechanism in which, without some populist traits, it is impossible to reach office or attract voters. For Venezuela, it has been simpler to prove that populism is the current *modus vivendi* for everyone interested in local politics. It is, instead, harder to figure out whether this is the case for Ecuador and to what extent. The last Ecuadorian presidents (Correa, Moreno, Lasso, Noboa) all had some populist characteristics, with Correa being the more prone to traditional, fully populist, and Lenín Moreno the less inclined to populist leadership.

Ecuadorian authors have tried to understand if their country is, in fact, populism-oriented or not. Trávez García (2017) found that emotions heavily drive Ecuadorian voters in their political culture. Thus, Ecuadorians do reward political leaders who grab their feelings when it comes to speeches, rallies, and, nowadays, social media. Trávez García concludes that Ecuador holds a mixed political culture formed by policies of subservience to leaders’ discourse and participation. Moreover, populism is not considered exceptional for Ecuador, but it is part of its political culture, allowing Ecuadorian voters to use populism-generated accountability as a tool for participative democracy, also thanks to leaders’ continuous appeal to people’s emotions (Trávez García, p. 30). With the deterioration of citizens’ safety in Ecuador, this paper suggests that populism is becoming “endemic” because candidates are forced to messianically promote their plans to address the national criminal crisis. Domestic insecurity has been the main driver for shaping the Ecuadorian populist transition from Correa to Noboa.

The current president inherited the technocratic populist leadership that characterized Correa’s terms (Padoan, 2017, p. 528) by including appointees with solid academic and technical credentials. Inside Ecuador, analysts reacted to Noboa’s brief inauguration, proposing that it was an example of this government’s pragmatism, outlined by the numerous presences of US-educated civil servants in the current administration, among which Noboa himself (Zavala, 2023). If, in the past, Correa’s “technopopulism” (de la Torre, 2020, p. 94) was a sort of compromise between leftist populism and a technocratic approach to issues like the economy, Noboa’s election has been identified as the victory for the elite’s populism (Martone, 2023). This paper claims populist traits in Noboa’s political leadership are primarily present in his use of social media. During the last electoral campaign, one of the highlights for Noboa was distributing thousands of his cardboard figures, which his supporters then shared on social media in all sorts of public places (*El Universo*, 2023). This is only a part of the populist management of the mediatic campaign realized by Noboa’s team, but it is sufficient to understand how the populist transition in Ecuador did not move along ideology, like in Venezuela; it has been instead related to the mediatic campaign. It should also be recognized that Noboa only delivered partial populist aspects in political discourse, but he rarely promoted the traditional factional division proper of Latin American populism.

Moreover, the popular engagement generated by this mediatic populist initiative is successful for participative and horizontal democracy, in which people are directly part of the campaign. Correa also used a similar tool for the same purpose during his presidency. The broadcast program *Enlaces Ciudadanos* (Burbano de Lara, 2020) was created to engage with people through speeches and presentations at a time when social media did not have the current weight in political leadership. Even if Noboa’s degree of populism remains to be seen through his ruling time, the style matches with his father’s right-wing populism (Mila-Maldonado & García Mayoral, 2023, p. 2), adapted to an electoral campaign in which messianism was everyone’s recipe for selling his or her solution to Ecuador’s high crime rates.

The difference for Noboa is that the current president appears as an interesting mixed typology of political leaders in Latin America, a bridge between old characteristics under a modern vision for the regional right wing. Similarly to El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele, Noboa reflects the traits of a “digital *caudillo*” (Pallister, 2021) that relies on social media as the main way for consensus, suggesting an updated element within the Weberian categorizations: Digital legitimacy. Noboa also conserves approaches already experimented by political leaders in Latin America. Born in Miami, the young president of Ecuador is, because of his very background, a neoliberal politician. Privatizations and market openings will come with no surprise in Ecuador’s next 18 months, together with a decided handshake to the International Monetary Fund and other Western financial institutions. Noboa is a replica of the “neo-populist” identified by Morán (2021, p. 30) in Latin America during the 1990s, with representatives like Argentina’s Carlos Menem. The actual direction of Ecuador’s populist transition remains to be seen: A complex mixture of technocracy, altered populism, and mediatic participative democracy.

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The horizontal accountability generated by Ecuador's "endemic populism" will force Noboa to keep seeking digital legitimacy for a short period of time, during which Ecuadorians demand that their insecurity problems be solved in the fastest way possible. As the recent CID Gallup poll showed (2023), populist leaders have the highest approval rates in Latin America, another reason for Noboa to balance his perhaps excessive pragmatism with the amount of populism that Ecuadorians and Latin Americans use to favor.

## Conclusion

Latin America and populism are part of the same shared history. Political leadership in the region could not be fully described if a significant portion of attention is not paid to the "endemic populism" that affects most Latin American countries. This work does not ignore the negative consequences generated by populism, namely the extreme social and political polarization that is present, for instance, in Venezuela. However, the presence of systemic and systematic populism should also be studied without a preconceived negative assumption. First, as pointed out in the initial sections of this paper, populism and populist transitions should be granted the peculiarity of belonging to democratic experiences that do not forcedly fit into the liberal paradigm for democracy.

In other words, populist transitions also represent continuity for horizontal and participative democracy because populism brings relevant degrees of horizontal accountability and popular involvement in national and international political processes. Moreover, the focus of this analysis is also to prove that populism is not an ideological prerogative. The connection between classic or traditional populism and the left in Latin America is sometimes reductive. Populism is, instead, the main political style for many leaders in Latin America; social and political changes that occurred throughout history demonstrated that populism is adaptable to new trends, such as social media.

The cases studied here, Venezuela and Ecuador, show two different variations of populist transition. With Chávez and Maduro, given their ideological affinity, Venezuela faced a direct populist transition in which the subsequent leader, previously designated, decided to emulate the predecessor in his populist style. For Ecuador, Correa's populism implicitly became a model to follow, even for right-wing President Noboa, mostly regarding popular engagement through broadcast and social media. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, for Maduro, there is widespread acceptance of his full populist leadership, and it is one of the reasons that explain even the attitude of Venezuelan diverse oppositions, themselves committed to a similar degree of populism. About Noboa, conclusions on his populist leadership can be drawn more from the past political campaign in Ecuador than from his actual presidency. This paper has suggested that Noboa's use of certain mediatic strategies appears to be a populist way to acquire popular consensus.

Only time will tell if Noboa follows technocratic and pragmatic political leadership or if the dramatic Ecuadorian context will force him to rely on the well-known local, pure populism. In all cases, the good news is that in Venezuela and Ecuador, leaders cannot plan their policies without thinking about the reactions that people will have. The bitter news is that the continuation of Latin American populism will likely produce messianic leaders characterized by beautiful promises that often do not respect the reality of things.

## Notes

[1] According to latest *Latinobarómetro's* poll, Ecuadorians are in the 4<sup>th</sup> place for regional approval to authoritarian rule over democracy, under certain circumstances. One of the reasons for the Ecuadorians' increased acceptancy for authoritarianism, compared to previous *Latinobarómetro's* polls, is without a doubt the deterioration of safety and citizenship's security.

[2] On Duque, Javier Corrales writes: "Colombia's right-wing populism is returning by way of President-elect Iván Duque, 41, an open protégé of former President Álvaro Uribe, Latin America's most famous right-wing populist": Corrales, J. (2018, June 25). The Return of Populism, Latin America Style. *International New York Times*. Gale Academic OneFile.

[3] Interview with Gian Paolo Bajón Biagi, General, Division of Active Reserves, National Bolivarian Armed Forces of



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Venezuela. The interview was structured with written questions and conducted for the course LASP 7503-02 *States & Societies: Latin American & The Caribbean*, taught by Prof. Angelo Rivero Santos.

[4] Conaghan (2008, p. 52) labeled Correa's political leadership as "Permanent Campaign, Permanent Confrontation." On media and opposition under Correa's government, Conaghan writes: "Correa's list of purported enemies has expanded to include segments of the mainstream media. While Correa enjoyed generally favorable coverage as a presidential candidate in 2006, his relationship with the media soured when he stepped up criticism of individual journalists and media owners whom he accused of conspiring to destabilize the government. Correa has begun routinely trashing the media as the tool of Ecuador's 'oligarchy' ..." (Conaghan, 2008, p. 54).

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