

# Birds of a Feather: Populism and the Pandemic

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**RESUMO:** A pandemia do COVID-19 dominou as noticias en 2020 e subliñou outra enfermidade de perigosa que rexurdiu en moitos gobernos por todo o mundo no últimos vinte anos: o populismo. Os líderes populistas, tanto da esquerda como a dereita, tentaron aproveitar da pandemia para consolidar o seu poder. O seu éxito dependeu da resistencia das institucións democráticas dos seus respectivos estados, como demostraron as recentes eleccións presidenciais en EEUU e as lexislativas en Venezuela. Como era de esperar, as institucións aguataron en EEUU, mentres se pisaron aínda máis en Venezuela. Pero igual que esperamos con optimismo moderado a eficacia da vacina para o COVID-19, aínda que en EEUU temos que ser conscientes que aínda non estamos vacinados do autoritarismo.

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**ABSTRACT:** The COVID-19 pandemic dominated the headlines in 2020 and it highlighted another dangerous sickness that has resurged in politics all over the globe for the last twenty years: populism. Populist leaders on the left and the right have attempted to take advantage of the pandemic to further consolidate power. Whether or not they have been successful has depended on the strength of the democratic institutions of their respective states, as demonstrated by a comparative consideration of the recent presidential elections in the U.S. and the legislative elections in Venezuela. As we might have predicted, the institutions have held in the U.S., while they have been further trampled in Venezuela. But just as we should hold out only guarded hope for the vaccine to conquer COVID-19, even in the U.S. we should be mindful that we have not yet been vaccinated from authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Comparative politics, populism, pandemic, illiberal democracy, Venezuela, U.S.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 will go down in history as the virus of the year for 2020. While not discounting the danger of the ongoing pandemic, it is worth reminding ourselves that coronaviruses were first identified in the 1920s, assuredly existed prior, and have sporadically caught the world's attention for the last 100 years. The current iteration of the coronavirus has a clear origin and spread very quickly, beginning in Wuhan, China, from there supposedly to Europe, then to the United States and on to the rest of the world (not necessarily in that order). COVID-19 then mutated in December of 2020 to a more contagious form, purportedly first in the UK, with reported cases of the new strain identified from Italy to Iceland, and from South Africa to Australia. Luckily, scientists hope that the recently approved vaccines will serve against the spread of both strains. On this front, there is room for guarded optimism for 2021. Identifying and understanding the problem will help us to collectively protect ourselves and safely move forward.

As we complete the second decade of the twenty-first century, I argue that the socio-political virus of the 2000-2020 vicenary, without doubt, is populism. Like coronaviruses, populism has afflicted societies around the world for longer than we realize, and it comes in many mutations. We can safely claim that the roots of modern populism were sown in the United States in the late nineteenth century and spread to Europe and Latin America in the early-to-mid twentieth century. The Cold War, like the subzero vaccines we depend on now to neutralize the threat from COVID-19, seemingly kept populism frozen in time throughout most of the western world, although we can cite exceptions, such as New Zealand under Muldoon (1975-1984). And of course, often in response to Cold War geopolitics played out between the United States and the Soviet Union, populists rose to power in what we then derisively referred to as the Third World. Examples include Nasser's Egypt (1956-1970) and Perón's short-lived third term as president of Argentina (1973-1974).

While both hard scientists and social scientists are always researching, those in the hard sciences do so in a more linear manner, always building on the past to anticipate and respond to what might happen in the future. Of course, as evidenced by the current coronavirus outbreak, current events also shape the direction of their work. However, although social scientists also seek to anticipate the future, our record is not as good, and we are often left seeking to understand the recent past in order to guess the future. The attacks of September 11, 2001 seemed to confirm Samuel Huntington's post-Cold War warning, in 1993, of a looming "Clash of Civilizations," and the best efforts of the Bush Administration haphazardly attempted to sustain it, but a global clash has yet to materialize. Four years prior, Huntington's disciple, Francis Fukuyama, asked whether or not the "end of history" was around the corner thanks to the looming collapse of the Soviet Union and the universalization of western liberal democracy (1989). If anything, the politics of, and policy responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the problems of liberal democracy itself, both in the West and beyond, and, I maintain, populism has been the catalyst.

The work of another social scientist merits special mention. Social psychologist Michael Billig's groundbreaking *Banal Nationalism* was first published in 1995. While his thesis, that the influence of unnoticed reproduction of state identity that surrounds us all, often with detrimental consequences, unquestionably holds up today, his chapter on postmodernism and

identity has proven to be especially prescient. Billig predicts that “globalization” (which he puts in quotes, because it was still a new term over twenty-five years ago) would result in “not a uniform world, but a world of limited, independent uniformities” (130). From there, in practice disproving Fukuyama’s claim of the homogenizing force of liberal democracy internationally, Billig argues that globalization will also multiply “differences within nations” (132). Billig never uses the term “populism” in *Banal Nationalism*, but there is no doubt that populism thrives on differences both between and within states. Two and half decades later, the uniform threat of global spread of the pandemic, much like once novel idea of globalization, simultaneously exacerbates these differences all the same.

## 1. Populism and the Pandemic: Preface

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Before turning to the numerous examples of the toxic politics of pandemic nationalism, an overwhelmingly brief overview of twenty-first century populism is warranted, which serves to both confirm Billig’s predictions and to frame the rest of this article. Venezuela’s late former president, Hugo Chávez, was among the vanguard of contemporary populism. He was a mixed-race military officer who advocated for the poor in a multiracial country with several hundred years’ history of elite rule, which was overwhelmingly white (Nelson, 2011). While democratically-elected in 1998, he immediately began “crowding out” first the opposition and then democracy itself (Corrales and Penfold, 2007). Chávez died of cancer in 2013 and his hand-picked and currently very unpopular populist successor, Nicolás Maduro, despite having overseen the greatest economic collapse in the history of the Americas, is now the second-longest serving president in Latin America (Rodríguez, F., 2020). We will see below that, if anything, the pandemic has strengthened his hold on power (Taladrid, 2020).

Echoing Billig, Chasteen notes that the failure of globalization to notably “produce universal prosperity” in Latin America led to the “new left turn” throughout the region. Newly elected, socialist (to varying degrees), populist presidents were elected on anti-neoliberal, often anti-U.S., platforms, in the mold of Chávez, including Lula da Silva in Brazil (2003-2010), the Kirchner era in Argentina (2003-2015, and then back in by proxy in 2019), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006-2019), Michele Bachelet in Chile (2006-2010 and then again 2014-2018), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007-2017), the return to power by Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2007 to the present), Fernando Lugo in Paraguay (2008 until his swift 48-hour impeachment and removal from office in 2012), José Mujica in Uruguay (2010-2015), and then Dilma Rousseff who followed Lula in 2011, until her impeachment and removal in 2016 (Chasteen, 2016, pp. 335-339; Reid, 2017, pp. 305-307). As a couple of impeachments might have indicated, in a few places the pendulum has swung back to the right, albeit a populist right, notably in Brazil, with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. But as the presidential election of 2018 in Mexico proves, with Andrés Manuel López Obrador eking out victory, or the further entrenchment of Maduro’s dictatorship in Venezuela, leftwing populism, at least in name, is far from disappearing from Latin America (The Forty-year itch, 2019).

The same failures of globalization, notably to provide equitable access to its benefits, have rocked European politics in recent decades, too. In the case of Europe, the political tinder-

box has been kindled by immigration, xenophobia, and out-and-out racism, along with plenty of ire directed at the European Union and its perceived weakness in addressing all of the above, albeit not uniformly in each country (Drozdiak, 2017; Fekete, 2019). While rightwing-populism has not been as effective at gaining power in parliamentary Europe as its leftwing counterpart in presidentialist Latin America, the proportionality of Europe's parliamentary systems has meant that minority rightwing populist parties have greatly influenced domestic electoral politics throughout the continent, as well as at the EU-level. Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front National*, founded in France in 1972 and now led by his daughter Marine Le Pen and called *le Rassemblement national* (National Rally), was at the vanguard of contemporary European populism (Drozdiak, 2017, pp. 53-54), but it is hard to miss the nostalgia for the fascist regimes of the twentieth century across the Continent today.

There is no shortage of examples from all over. Like the National Rally in France, some have been around since before the turn of the current century (or shortly thereafter): The Sweden Democrats (1988), Hungary's Fidesz (1988), Italy's Northern League (1991), Greece's Golden Dawn (1993), The Danish People's Party (1995), The Finns Party (1995), and Poland's Law and Justice (founded in 2001). Some are recent spinoffs from center-right parties, such as Spain's VOX (founded by disgruntled ex-members of the Popular Party in 2013), or Denmark's The New Right (2015, more extreme than the Danish People's Party). Some were created independently, such as the Alternative for Germany (2013).

It should be mentioned that some European polities offer leftwing, arguably illiberal, parties to their voters, such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, in no small part thanks to a strong leftwing history and as a backlash to EU austerity measures (Kirchick, 2017, p. 201). Some of the populist parties in Europe listed above have managed to find their way to high office and, in Maduro-like fashion, show no signs of ever letting go, particularly Orbán's Fidesz and Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (Drozdiak 2017). In other places, they best operate in opposition, often pulling centrist and center-right parties further to the right, while pulling the center-left parties to the center and pushing leftwing parties further to the left. It is safe to say that the Tories in the UK, led by Boris Johnson and fueled by Brexit fever, evidence a rightward shift, while they radicalize the Scottish National Party in the process. Although Johnson is an undoubtedly a populist in his own right, I would stop short of lumping him together with Orbán and Kaczyński.

Four other populists must be mentioned, too: Vladimir Putin of Russia, effectively in power since 1999; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, de facto leader of the country since 2003; Narendra Modi of India, first elected prime minister in 2014 and again in 2019; and, of course, the soon-to-be former U.S. president, Donald J. Trump (elected in 2016, losing his bid for reelection four years later). All of these men are nationalists and illiberal populists. All have used religion both to their own advantage and in order to oppress the human rights of others. All of these leaders, although democratically elected at one point, have abused the institutions of the state to their own political benefit. And in December of 2020, all of them lead countries in the top ten of COVID-19 cases and deaths. If we include the aforementioned populists in Brazil, Mexico, and the UK, seven of the ten most-affected countries are led by populists. (To be fair, five of these are also in the world top-ten of largest countries by population.)

This is of course not a claim that populist government leads to calamity per se. What I mean to show is that populism “works best” (or causes the least damage) in opposition. As we have seen, populism is often quite reactionary socially, be it to globalization, to immigration, or to EU austerity. The problem is that such reaction (or lack of proactivity) often carries over into policymaking with disastrous consequences, first for public health, demonstrated by how populists have handled the pandemic, and then for democracy itself. Since the outbreak began, some polities have been fortunate enough to have the final say on the future of their leaders at the ballot box, such as the United States. Others, like Venezuela, have not been so lucky, as the electoral system had been hollowed out by the Maduro regime well before the recent legislative elections were held there in early December 2020 (Ghitis 2020). In other words, the pandemic can bring about regime change in a democracy that has only flirted with populism, while it can further entrench a populist autocrat.

## 2. Populism and the Pandemic: Praxis

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We often think of democracy as a process, especially around election time, but this is incomplete, and we see this most clearly in moments of crisis. Democratic institutions exist to protect us from politicians who, now more than ever, usurp them, eroding liberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997). If we do not, collectively, begin to think about how to protect the structure of democracy, democratic backsliding will become another existential threat that we will have to confront (Bermeo, 2016). I do not want to be sensationalist, but our willful ignorance of democratic structures fuels populism and threatens the liberal democratic model and, thanks to COVID-19, unfortunately, we are not without examples from around the world.

Outgoing President Trump in the U.S. is a populist who has long ignored traditional norms and institutions. But the “Trump phenomenon” is not the sickness but rather a symptom of an uncared-for democracy (Sullivan, 2016), evidence of a preexisting condition, if you will. Trump is a product of the weakness of a decentralized, biparty system; institutional ambiguities of the U.S. Constitution; and largely uninformed, more-than-latently racist and xenophobic swathes of an electorate sick of the establishment. As president, Trump took advantage of these realities to consolidate his authority during this pandemic to further his anti-immigrant agenda (Guttentag and Bertozzi, 2020). Flouting the rule of law, summary deportations became the new normal (albeit nothing more than an intensification of the old normal), many forms of immigrant visas were put on 60-day (perhaps indefinite) hold, and, for the first few months of the pandemic, while Trump supporters protested the closure of barbershops, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) suspended in-person services. This last measure caused existential fear for all immigrants who had migrated the legal way, as demanded by Trump, as a lack of USCIS services put in jeopardy one’s short-, medium-, and long-term future and is infinitely more of an inconvenience than having to forgo a haircut in Michigan.

A member of the European Union since 2004, Hungary has become the posterchild for populist, illiberal democracy (Biró-Nagy, 2017). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, an admirer of Trump, xenophobe, and Eurosceptic, is a strongman who never misses a chance to capitalize on a crisis. He did so in the summer of 2015 by attempting to close Hungary’s borders and caging

migrants who managed to cross them when the “refugee crisis” emanating from the Syrian Civil War and the wider Middle East filled world headlines (Goździak, 2019), and he is doing it again now, thanks to the pandemic. The unicameral parliament, controlled by his Fidesz party, has allowed him to legislate by decree, cancel elections, and punish those who spread “fake news” about the coronavirus (The Orbán way, 2020).

In India, the world’s largest democracy, Hindu nationalist, strongman, and another Trump pal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken advantage of social discontent, religious fissures, and fatigue with traditional parties since before he was elected prime minister in 2014 (Mukhopadhyay, 2019). He has abandoned constitutional norms and social traditions to treat Muslims, about 14% of some 1.4 billion people, as second-class citizens, blaming them for the spread of COVID-19 in the country (Frayer, 2020). And the coronavirus crisis has come months after the bicameral parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 which, in conjunction with strict application of the National Register of Citizens, may well render millions of impoverished Muslim citizens stateless if they are unable to prove their Indian citizenship (Mehta, 2019).

Venezuela offers a classic case study in populist democratic backsliding. Once a stable and robust, albeit unequal and imperfect, democracy, the Venezuelan Constitution is now a dead letter. For whatever hopes one might have had for the late, and initially democratically-elected, Hugo Chávez’s populist Bolivarian Revolution (Benveniste, 2015, pp. 31-35), it is now a country whose president and Chávez protégé, Nicolás Maduro, won a rigged reelection in 2018, spends most of time deriding the self-proclaimed interim president, Juan Guaidó, and verbally lambasting the U.S. (Trinkunas, 2019). In true illiberal fashion, after the regime lost the legislative elections in 2015, the last legitimately-held vote in the country, and thus control of the constitutionally-sanctioned unicameral National Assembly, led by Guaidó, Maduro created a dubiously-constitutional parallel Constituent National Assembly, through a rigged referendum and packed it with loyalists (Divide and Rule, 2017).

Most recently, the regime finalized its takeover of the entire political system, by orchestrating electoral victory for his party in National Assembly elections in early December 2020, with a turnout of 31%, 40 points fewer than the elections five years prior (Elecciones en Venezuela, 2020). Once a country open to immigrants, predominantly from the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East (Faiola, 2018), as democracy and all institutions except the military have eroded to nonexistence, the country has bled emigrants in recent years (Crisis venezolana, 2019). At present, it seems that COVID-19 serves Maduro just fine, with many of the best, brightest, and most educated Venezuelans abroad, including thousands of medical doctors, and with the country under strict lockdown, enforced by the military, both in hospitals and in the street (Taladrid, 2020). In this petrostate where no one can buy gasoline, thanks to sanctions, corruption, and plummeting oil prices, the Maduro regime fears the populace, yet the opposition is now conveniently paralyzed-in-place (Briscoe, 2020).

In each case, economic and demographic changes aggravate other social problems, such as inequality and corruption, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and will return with a vengeance once we overcome the virus. These other preexisting social ills will not have gone away because we have stayed inside (Packer 2020). When traditional parties fail

to fix problems, electorates democratically explore their options (Abrams 2020). Superficially, nothing is wrong with this; this is how democracy works. The problem is that many electorates, prior to the pandemic, chose deficient leaders who selfishly employ the institutions of the state to demagogically play on social fears, to protect their allies from the rule of law, and to punish their enemies, not to better the lives of their constituents. In the post-pandemic era, my worry is that some electorates might either entrench populists already in power or opt for new populists. Either way, when elected powers do not respect the rule of law, civil society suffers. This is the slippery slope. While democratic processes provide us the means to collectively face problems, if we do not elect wisely, we end up damaging the structure of democracy from the inside. And this was the direction many countries were heading even before the coronavirus turned the world upside down (COVID-19 and autocracy, D 2020).

Until we realize that democracy implies much more than simply voting and we learn to make informed decisions, sometimes placing our immediate self-interests aside, populist-driven democratic backsliding poses a real danger. This apathy and/or unawareness further threatens the vulnerable, less-privileged, and excluded within any society, as it invigorates illiberal populists. While we rightfully focus on overcoming COVID-19, hoping for wide distribution of a vaccine in 2021, with our lives in the hands of a political class who could be replaced by even more mendacious and inept leadership, this danger will not recede.

### 3. Birds of a Feather: A Comparative Case Study

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We compare to make important decisions: where to live, what car to buy, whether or not to break up with a romantic partner, or to get married, etc. This translates to the realm of the political, which is both the root and the goal of comparative politics: Which country has the best health care system? Which country has best handled its policy response to the coronavirus pandemic? Or to immigration? What countries are truly socialist? Or have a truly populist regime? Is it Leftist? Rightist? Sometimes the waters are muddied given that maintaining the uniformity of definitions is tricky, yet comparing political systems can shed light on answers. While operationalizing democracy and applying the term to a disparate array of cases can be complicated, we could simply ask which countries are more democratic than others? Why not rank them from authoritarian to democratic? Or we simply compare a pair: for many reasons, the U.S., for all its flaws, is more democratic than Venezuela, as the recent elections in both countries demonstrate. But this does not mean that two leaders from different systems cannot be similar.

In liberal, institutionally sound democracies, we are free to compare our options come election time. In countries with a two-party system, like in the U.S., sometimes our two electoral options, especially at the top of the ticket, are not always the best, like in 2016. For many voters, and for those paying attention internationally, the options in 2020 were not much better. But they were better than the options for Venezuelans in the last presidential election in 2018 or, again, in December 2020's legislative elections: the choices boiled down to a vote for the regime, often in exchange for food or under threat of losing your public sector job if you vote "the wrong way," or abstain. Such is life in a country that has backslid from an illiberal democracy to an authoritarian dictatorship.

Due to the fact Venezuela is a failed state, Venezuelans abroad continuously compare, and from their comparisons, they freely offer many ominous warnings to anyone who will listen. “Thanks to Hugo Chávez, Venezuela is just like Cuba. And thanks to Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico is the next domino to fall to socialism in Latin America.” “The Socialist Party-Podemos coalition government in Madrid is going to turn Spain into the Venezuela of Europe.” “Bernie Sanders is a socialist who will bring democracy to an end in the U.S.” “You do not understand the danger because you have not lived in a communist country like ours!” In the U.S., where many voters have ties to countries abroad, it is natural that Venezuelan-Americans bring to bear the experiences of their homeland to the ballot box in their new home, and that they consider how U.S. foreign policy might affect their loved ones who have not migrated. Thus, for many Venezuelans in the U.S., such comparative insight translated into support for Donald J. Trump in the elections of November 2020 (Oria, 2020; Rodríguez, J., 2020).

Much like their Cuban-American and Nicaraguan-American counterparts, Venezuelan-Americans lean hard toward the GOP out of a fear of anything “leftist,” and the perception of which candidate in the U.S. is best for the opposition forms the basis of their decision on who to vote for (Bolton, 2020, p. 284). Trump is antisocialist and, thanks to the GOP rhetoric since the Cold War, the Democratic Party is perceived by Venezuelans as socialist. They particularly did not like Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialist. This is where the comparisons begin and end in the Venezuelan mind: Sanders is an old and grey version of Chávez. We have to be against him since he must be pro-Maduro. Biden must not be any different (Rodríguez, J., 2020). But what about Juan Guaidó, the last legitimately-elected leader of the Venezuelan National Assembly in 2015, head of the opposition, and self-declared (and recognized by Trump as the) true, acting president of the country? Guaidó’s party, Voluntad Popular, is affiliated with the Socialist International. Compared to Guaidó, Sanders is a rather moderate socialist. Compared to Sanders, much to the chagrin of left-leaning voters in the U.S., Biden practically is a Republican. Clear-eyed comparisons help us understand these realities.

What is more dangerous than *Chavista* socialism itself is the comparative absolutism that has come about in the kneejerk backlash to Chávez’s life and legacy, which ruins the utility of comparing. It generates ideas that rationally seem inevitable – we should support Trump because socialism is bad – as a consequence of poorly implemented empiricism – Chávez and Maduro are true socialists, and so must be the Democrats in the U.S. Contrary to popular opinion, for Venezuelans exiled in the U.S. as well as those trapped in their home country, the choice is clear: Joe Biden was the better, small-d democratic option (Barrera Tyszka, 2020; Oria, 2020). A Trump reelection would have had *Chavista*-like consequences for the democratic institutions in the U.S., and it would have perpetuated his xenophobic domestic and foreign policies as well as his abysmal handling of the pandemic, both of which are threats to the entire world.

How about we compare the two most (in)famous populist politicians of recent memory in the U.S. and Venezuela, Trump and Chávez? Trump has been swimming in authoritarian, *Chavista*-like waters since he began his campaign. His approach illustrates Billig’s point on the bifurcation of modern politics rather well: “America First” stressed “independent uniformity” of the sovereign state while demonizing the “Mexican rapists and murderers” emphasized the

“differences with in the state.” In the face bad poll numbers, in the summer of 2020 he had proposed delaying the November elections, that the only way he could lose is if “they rig the election,” and that he should be eligible for at least a third term, which is unconstitutional (Gellman, 2020). Since losing the November election, his behavior, while risible, has been downright dangerous for democracy.

Much like Chávez and his successor Maduro, Trump uses the institutions of the state for his own political benefit, breaking norms, traditions, and, likely, the law. The most blatant pre-election example was the manipulation of the U.S. Postal Service. In many counties, where voting is managed, millions vote by mail, including Trump. In 2020 it was expected and confirmed that many more people voted by mail because of the coronavirus. But Trump has claimed without evidence, before and after the election, that mail-in ballots are rife with fraud. So, last summer, his Postmaster General pulled mailboxes from the streets and mail sorting machines from post offices in cities where Trump lags in the polls (Ray, 2020). While voting is handled locally in the U.S. and the postal service is national, it seems that serving the nation and serving Trump are the same thing.

The Republican National Convention, celebrated in August of 2020, provided further proof of this politically self-serving, norm-busting behavior. Despite the pandemic, the GOP convention was only partially virtual and many events took place at the White House (with very few face coverings) while protests against social injustice continued throughout the country. On the second night, Trump hosted a nationalization ceremony, breaking the USCIS rules to not politicize such a solemn event, and in which the new U.S. citizens did not know that they would be props. Hosting many speeches at the White House and using the National Mall as a backdrop for the closing fireworks broke with years of tradition against the use of public property for political ends (*How the Republican National Convention Broke Legal Norms*, 2020). Although the nominee usually only speaks the last of the four nights, Trump spoke every evening, turning the event into a U.S.-version of “Aló Presidente,” Chávez’s unscripted TV show in which he would talk for hours on end.

All of this illiberal rhetoric and action went on while the pandemic had killed nearly 200,000 people in the U.S. by the time of the convention and, in the face of the most sustained and consequential protests in recent memory, renders it difficult to refute the claim that Trump had all but forgotten about the coronavirus. We should remind ourselves of the events of 1 June in Washington D.C. in which police and National Guard troops gassed protestors outside of the White House to make room for Trump to walk over to a nearby church that he does not attend for a photo-op with a Bible in his hand (Rogers, 2020). While the circumstances, the level of violence, and the outcomes clearly differed from the protests outside of the Miraflores, the presidential palace in Caracas on 11 April 2002 (Nelson, 2009), for those who study the politics of both Venezuela and the U.S., it is hard not to compare the two. Since the summer of 2020 in the U.S., protests have intensified as police violence continues. Continuing with the comparisons, answering Trump’s dog whistle/blow horn, conservative vigilantes now shoot protestors for sport and set fires outside of Black churches in the U.S., which is not dissimilar to the violence perpetrated by the *colectivos* in Venezuela, gangs of pro-regime militia that terrorize society with no consequence whatsoever (Bolton, 2020, p. 254).

Trump's unabashedly illiberal and anti-democratic behavior has continued since his election loss, too. While we cannot prove a counterfactual in the social sciences, I contend quite simply that Trump is acting as Maduro would if he *could* lose an election, by using his office to pressure the relevant institutions at all levels of the federal and state governments to overturn the results. But until free and fair elections are again held in Venezuela, there will never be a winner over Maduro. Trump was not as lucky, but he will not go quietly into the night. Immediately after the elections, he first pressured state and local officials (again, those who oversee elections in the U.S.) in states he lost, even Republicans who he once fêted, such as the governor of Georgia, to throw out voters in majority-minority districts before the vote was certified locally. Perhaps most egregiously, on 2 January 2021, Trump called the Secretary of State of Georgia, Brad Raffensperger, the chief election official of the state, to insist simultaneously that Trump won the state while at the same time that Mr. Raffensperger must "find 11,780 votes," which would curiously enough indeed put Georgia in Trump's win column by one vote (Diaz and Naylor, 2021). His second tactic was more institutional, by advocating that electors in the Electoral College ignore the results in states he lost to vote for him over Biden, on 14 December, which would have broken with 200-plus years of procedural norms. While employing these first two methods, the legal efforts to throw out votes began in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

None of these efforts have proved successful, despite Trump having legally, albeit illiberally, stacked the federal court system, including the Supreme Court, with the help of Mitch McConnell's leadership in the Senate. The courts have upheld the will of the people and the rule of law over the will of Trump. The same goes for the aforementioned state and local officials. In other words, the bureaucratic institutions of electoral democracy in the U.S. have held up to now.

The last political hurdle was overcome, with unprecedented bloodshed and destruction, just as this article was going to print and merited last-minute consideration. On 6 January 2021, Congress met in joint session to count the electoral votes, as mandated by the Constitution. This was the last procedural step in the electoral process before Biden's inauguration on 20 January. However, all that is required to delay confirmation of the results is an objection in writing from one member of the House and another from the Senate. And this is done state-by-state for all fifty states. From there, each chamber debates for up to two hours and then votes on whether or not to accept the result of the given state. If, after requisite debate for each objection, the results are accepted and upheld, the President of the Senate, who is Vice President Mike Pence, declares Biden the winner, which is what indeed happened. But this perfunctory and ceremonial confirmation took place much later than planned, in the early hours of 7 January.

Shortly before Congress met on the 6<sup>th</sup>, Trump appeared at a rally planned to coincide with the vote in order to protest the nearly inevitable result. In addition to the urging of the sitting president, the protesters-cum-insurrectionists counted on the support of one hundred and fifty Republican members of the House and a dozen Republican senators, including Senator Josh Howley of Missouri, possible presidential candidate in 2024, who had promised to lodge a several objections and counted on Mike Pence's backing. But that same morning Vice President Pence failed the Trump loyalty test. He released a statement in which he acknowledged that under the Constitution he cannot reject electoral votes unilaterally.

These circumstances, in conjunction with four years-plus of Trump's unchecked vitriol and impunity, culminated in thousands of his most ardent supporters breaching the U.S. Capitol, the first time such an event had happened since 1814, and resulted in the death of four insurrectionists and the injury of dozens of law enforcement officials. In the aftermath, with fewer than two weeks left in the Trump presidency, there are bipartisan calls for another impeachment or his unprecedented removal under the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Sprunt, 2021). Yet again, for many observers, the events of 6 January 2021 were reminiscent of the actions of the *colectivos chavistas* in Venezuela and will forever be a stain on American democracy. Marking the absurdity of the insurrection, which many call domestic terrorism, the Maduro regime released a statement, noting that this "lamentable episode" demonstrates that the U.S. "suffers from what its policies of aggression have caused in other countries" (*Venezuela dice que EE.UU. padece lo que ha generado en otros países*, 2021). In other words, Trump's disregard for his own democratic institutions provides an opportunity to the world's autocrats to claim comparative pseudo-legitimacy.

#### 4. What have you done for me lately?

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Speaking of loyalty tests and Venezuela, during his four years in office, Trump did little for Venezuelans, either in their home country or in the U.S. While Trump was quick to recognize Guaidó as the legitimate interim president in January of 2019, for which many Venezuelans were appreciative, Nicolás Maduro is still safe and sound in Caracas. To understand why Trump has not effectively done anything, we should consider what he thinks of Juan Guaidó and the state of affairs in Venezuela, which is described in John Bolton's tell-all book on Trump's foreign policy. (Bolton was once Trump's National Security Advisor, the third of four.) Trump declared to Bolton that "Maduro is strong and Guaidó is weak" (2020, p. 276), that Guaidó "doesn't have what it takes" (p. 268), calling him the "Beto O'Rourke of Venezuela" (p. 276). (O'Rourke, a Democrat, is a former member of the House from Texas and failed candidate for both the Senate and the Democratic nomination for president. And although O'Rourke is ten years older than Guaidó, the two do look a lot alike.)

In March of 2019, when it appeared that things were coming to a head in Venezuela and Maduro looked his most vulnerable, Fabiana Rosales, Guaidó's wife, visited the White House. Trump's takeaways, according to Bolton, were that she was very attractive but he was concerned that she did not wear a wedding ring (Bolton, 2020, p. 276). Concern for what a Venezuelan woman does and how she looks is reminiscent of Trump's treatment of former Miss Venezuela, Alicia Machado, who went on to win the then Trump-owned Miss Universe pageant, only to suffer repeated public humiliation from Trump (Graves, 2016).

As for the Venezuelan people, many were hopeful upon seeing "5,000 Troops to Colombia" on Bolton's notepad at a press conference in June 2019. Why was that displayed so openly? Trump had instructed Bolton to "have fun with the press" (Bolton, 2020, p. 260). And what about sanctions? Trump was worried about sanctioning the banking sector in Venezuela too harshly, as this would jeopardize the economic interests of Visa and Mastercard in the country (pp. 269 and 283). For four years, Trump has refused to extend Temporary Protected Status

to Venezuelans in the U.S. (Oppenheimer, 2020). This designation allows the lawful presence in the U.S. of third-country nationals who cannot safely return to their homeland, as is the case with Venezuela, with its collapsed economy, hollowed-out democratic institutions, and an emigration crisis as a consequence of both. While under TPS, third-country nationals cannot be deported and they can legally work. But they cannot vote and Trump is only interested in Venezuelans who have become U.S. citizens, especially those in Florida. Biden has promised to extend TPS to Venezuelans once in office.

Beyond TPS, Trump approved the use of sanctioned money frozen in U.S. banks once held by high-ranking officials in the Maduro regime to finance his wall on the U.S.-Mexico border (DeYoung and Faiola, 2020). This is oil money stolen from the Venezuelan people by political appointees, military leaders, and other accomplices of Chávez and Maduro. With Biden, there is no more wall and the frozen money in question will eventually be returned to a free and democratic Venezuela. Again, Trump was after any support he could rummage in Florida from nationalized Venezuelan *voters*. He is not worried about the Venezuelan *people*.

## 5. Populist International

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To better understand the geopolitical status quo as well as international relations of populism, we need to think about a pair of bilateral relations with the U.S. in the context of Venezuela: Mexico (often not considered) and Russia (unavoidable for both the U.S. and Venezuela).

Trump began his campaign for the GOP nomination in June of 2015 with the famous “Mexican rapist and murderers” speech at Trump Tower. This was both directly pointed at Mexico, but it is also code, intentionally or simply ignorantly, for his political base, as for many xenophobes and racists in the U.S., “Mexico” is synonymous with “Latin America” in its entirety. Trump’s most emphatic talking point during the 2016 campaign was that he would build a wall on the U.S.’s southern border and that Mexico would pay for it. (It is worth pointing out that to the ears of his supporters, Trump’s wall was meant to keep out Venezuelans as well.) Flash forward to 2018 when the leftist populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) won the presidential election in Mexico, riding a wave of very anti-Trump rhetoric. I do not personally know an *Anti-Chavista/Anti-Madurista* Venezuelan who views AMLO in a good light. But you know who does? Donald J. Trump. Why? All it took was AMLO changing his rhetoric once in office to pacify Trump. It is that easy with a megalomaniac. The person matters more than the ideology.

What indirectly ties Maduro and Trump together are the puppet strings that connect the two of them to Vladimir Putin’s able hands. I cannot go into detail here, but before Chávez’s death, he indebted Venezuela by the billions to Putin, who injected Venezuela with cash on the promise of future oil exports. While some of this money did help the poor, much was embezzled and held outside of the country. But this clearly explains Putin’s interest in propping up Maduro, now with military aid and even troops. If Maduro falls, Putin loses his investment.

We do not need to list here the supposed connections between Trump and Putin, as the rumors have circulated for years now. What is certain is that Putin is up to his neck in both the U.S. and in Venezuela, which has complicated Trump’s foreign policy and is yet another hinde-

rance to democracy in Venezuela. How can Trump be effectively anti-Maduro without aggravating Putin? Why should Venezuelans trust Trump in light of his ties to one of Maduro's closest allies and sponsors? If Trump is fine with Putin's dismantling of what democratic institutions were left in Russia, why should Trump care about Maduro doing the same in Venezuela? Witness what little Trump has done to support the pro-democracy movement in Russia's neighbor and ally, Belarus, since Alexander Lukashenko "won" a sixth term as president in an election rife with fraud allegations on 9 August 2020.

Trump is mainly worried about Trump, his relationship with Putin, the Venezuelan vote in Florida, and the interests of Visa and Mastercard in Venezuela, likely in that order. And if push does somehow come to shove with Maduro during Trump's final days in office, all Maduro has to do is follow the AMLO playbook: talk kindly of Trump and he would be safe from U.S. intervention. Putin knows this. According to Bolton, in a call between Moscow and Washington on 23 May, 2019, Putin compared Juan Guaidó to Hillary Clinton, as a pair of wannabe presidents (2020, p. 283). This would have been music to Trump's ears and is worrisome for the future of Venezuela. Venezuelan-Americans taking the anti-socialist bait from Trump vis-à-vis Maduro might serve the GOP in Florida, but it is not helpful to the cause of Venezuelan democracy.

## 6. Return of the Technocrats: Biden's Venezuela Policy

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Assuming Biden is sworn in on 20 January 2021 and Trumpian populism is shelved for at least four years, for better or worse (Rodríguez, F., 2020), the sanctions are not going anywhere (*The Presidential Candidates on Venezuela*, 2019), just the same as if Trump had been reelected. But while Trump has shunned most forms of multilateralism since he took office, Biden will have much more support from the international community in dealing with and pressuring Maduro. Biden would not use frozen Venezuelan assets to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. For Venezuelans in the U.S. at present, Biden would authorize TPS. For Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring countries in the region, we would expect more aid from Washington (*Joe Biden Answers 10 Questions on Latin America*, 2020).

As discussed above, Maduro scheduled elections for the National Assembly in December of 2020, which took place during this disputed, lame-duck interval to conclude Trump's presidency. While the Trump Administration has not recognized the result of the elections in Venezuela as legitimate, calling them a "charade," neither has Biden, who has previously called Maduro "a dictator" (*U.S. Condemns Venezuela Election as 'Charade'*, 2020). This is indicated by Biden already having committed himself to extending TPS, which he would not do were democracy not in shambles in Venezuela. But with the U.S. election behind him, it is not likely that Trump will care about what happens in Venezuela ever again. The fact of the matter is that the status quo would have probably have remained were Trump to have won reelection, especially if he had done so while losing Florida, in order to punish Venezuelans for not having supported him enough. Now that he is on his way out of the White House, he passes on this regional hot potato to Biden to deal with come January 2021. And, just as will be the case with Biden's handling of the pandemic, Trump will soon be the first to tweet about how badly Biden handles the mess.

While we know that most anti-Maduro Venezuelans were pro-Trump, it will be interesting to see who and how many will be willing to openly work with the incoming Biden Administration. Guaidó, as recognized president of Venezuela by Trump, has had representation in the U.S., in the form of Carlos Vecchio, who has stayed close to the Trump Administration. In February of 2020, in Washington, Vecchio met with Santiago Abascal, one of the aforementioned disgruntled former members of the center-right Popular Party in Spain and now the leader of new populist, far-right political party VOX, as it is in their common interest to badmouth *Chavismo* (El presidente de VOX se reunió con Vecchio, 2020). But this does not mean that Vecchio would not be eager to working with the Biden Administration. Ideologically, Venezuela's Voluntad Popular, as a member of the Socialist International, and VOX, the contemporary standard-bearer of Francoism, are not allies. And, like the good populist, Abascal's support for freedom in Venezuela has more to do with brandishing his political rivals in Spain as bedfellows of Maduro's than effecting regime change in Caracas. But Guaidó and his team have received bipartisan support in Washington since 2019 (Mansilla Blanco, 2020), and they are assuredly too pragmatic and further weakened after December's elections in Venezuela to not return the State Department's calls after 20 January 2021.

What is certain is that Biden will not be as superficially aggressive as Trump sounds (on rare occasion) regarding the regime in Caracas, but, again, what has Trump done up to now? Nothing but employ vapid rhetoric that has not gotten Venezuela anywhere closer to regaining democracy. The goal of Trump's discourse for nearly two years was to win votes where he had no margin for error in November's elections, like in Florida, in order to retain the White House. Now that Venezuela has ceased to be electorally useful for Trump, we can add it to his list of shithole countries, and Venezuelans can join their Mexican counterparts as rapists and murderers in Trump's post-president anti-immigrant rhetoric. This is not to downplay the clearly uphill battle facing Biden regarding Venezuela, to be sure, but at least he has a wealth of experience in international politics, he will do what he can to ease the suffering of Venezuelans at home and in the U.S., and, most importantly, he is free from the inertia-inducing spell cast over Trump by Putin.

## 7. Déjà Vu All Over Again: The Emptiness of Populism

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Theoretically, sound analysis and, empirically, a good warning emanating from recent history in Venezuela should go beyond the ideological. The same goes for the United States under Trump. The best comparative case study of leaders in Venezuela and the U.S. is not Nicolás Maduro and Bernie Sanders but rather, obviously, Hugo Chávez and Donald Trump. This is because both are authoritarian populists and, for leaders of such ilk, undoubtedly there comes the time when ideology is no longer useful to them. This happens on the far left and on the far right. Ideology eventually loses its value as a marketing strategy and that is when leaders abandon it (Barrera Tyszka, 2020). As observers, that is when we should, too. If we insist on including political ideologies in our analysis, we lose the benefits that sound comparisons foster and it can cloud our judgement in the process.

There was no reason why someone who is anti-Maduro and pro-Guaidó must be anti-Biden and pro-Trump simply because. To repeat, were we to rank them, Guaidó is to the left of Bernie Sanders. Biden is decidedly more conservative than Guaidó. Thus, for an anti-Maduro Venezuelan, the least useful tool to employ in determining who to back in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections was ideology.

Venezuelan-Americans voters had the opportunity to retrospectively vote in the U.S. presidential elections with two experiences in mind: how both Trump and Maduro botched their respective countries' handling of the pandemic. It is clear that from the outset, neither one knew what to do. Both have been more interested in staying in power than saving lives, yet they have gone about the former in different ways. Trump manipulated institutions and ignored scientists; Maduro abuses human rights while claiming to protect public health in a country with a dwindling number of doctors because his handling of the country has run them out (Taladrid, 2020). Their present policies are indicative of the hard truth that populists promise a lot and deliver very little. Their futures have depended upon and say more about the strength of their respective countries' institutions and the state of their democracies. Venezuela has next to no democracy left, because of *Chavismo* and Maduro the person, not socialism. Just as Maduro is not socialist in practice, Trump and Trumpism are not the Republican Party in the U.S., but the GOP is heading in that direction. Four years was not long enough to ensure Trump's complete takeover of the party. *Chavismo* has been around for over twenty years, to now, Trumpism has not made it to five, despite how much Trump has tried.

Twitter has become the updated iteration of Chávez's "Aló Presidente" for Trump, both full of insipid rhetoric and devoid of any true content, embodying the two of them perfectly. But what should scare us more are the letters sent along after the coronavirus stimulus checks, on White House letterhead and signed by the president, to make us think that Trump himself was bailing us out. Even worse are similar letters sent along with food from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's Farmers to Families Food Box program (Bottemiller Evich, 2020). This is *my Chavista*, not at all different than the stamps of silhouettes of both Chávez and Maduro on boxes of food distributed among the poor today in Venezuela. Are you in need? Are you hungry? I will help, but let me just remind you who to vote for in the process. This is populism at its basest and most dangerous.

Trust in what we have learned from the Chávez-Maduro regime, yes. But it is much more useful and appropriate that we focus on how Maduro has continued the Chávez tradition of taking advantage of the institutions of the state for his own political gain, not in a socialist ideology that was, in practice, abandoned years ago. Chávez was and Trump is a megalomaniac. Maduro followed Chávez by circumstance. Maduro is not charismatic and has no idea what he is doing, which is why he depends upon and must placate the military to have a hope of remaining in power, regardless of who occupies the White House. As an example of his abandonment of socialism, this military protection comes at price: Maduro distributes control over the "lawless fiefdoms" of the informal economy to his security forces (Rodríguez, F., 2020). Military bigwigs get rich on illegal mining and the drug trade while the rank-and-file can then feed their families. There is no market more capitalist and "free" than the black market.

At the same time, *Chavismo* should have prepared us to raise suspicions in the U.S. When the White House ceases to belong to us all and becomes another Trump property, when the president's children become political advisors with no oversight at all, when a presidential candidate for reelection uses the institutions of his office in order to remain in it, or when a sitting president of the U.S. declares that he deserves an unconstitutional third term or the delay of elections, alarm bells should have sounded to us all, but especially to Venezuelans. That is, unless they are ok with the sham Constituent National Assembly or with the lawless *colectivos* who terrorize those who do not support the regime. Just as Maduro was forced to relinquish state control in order to preserve his power, which is not very socialist, Trump tried to use the machinery of the state to do the same, which is not what we would expect of a conservative politician. But this goes to show us all that populism knows no ideological master. Populists serve themselves, especially in times of crisis. And the first person to recognize this fact should be any *anti-Chavista* Venezuelan.

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