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From Yellow Vests to Bolsonaro – Socioeconomic Status Unfairness and Populism

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From Yellow Vests to Bolsonaro: Socioeconomic Status, Unfairness, and Populism

Patrick Liddiard

Abstract: How has the declining influence of traditional political parties—through policy convergence, voter dealignment, and increased electoral system volatility—contributed to the rise of populism? Populist mobilization has frequently come in reaction to voters' sense that elites were treating them unfairly—whether left-wing populists mobilizing the previously marginalized or right-wing populists activating the downwardly mobile. Although the declining influence of political parties has been sufficient to produce unrest like France's "Yellow Vest" protest movement, in countries like Brazil it has been a combination of shocks that created a sense of unfairness for populists: changing socioeconomic status and cultural change, a severe recession, and potential party system collapse in the wake of a corruption scandal.

Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil three weeks before the "Yellow Vest" protests emerged in France in November 2018. Similar to the Yellow Vests' use of Facebook to organize their protests, Bolsonaro's presidential campaigning had used social media to reach directly to voters in the absence of a traditional mass party.[i] Like the Yellow Vest movement, Bolsonaro emerged in a country where mainstream political parties were in disarray and increasingly delegitimized in voters' eyes after converging on economic policies. And similar to 41 percent of France's electorate changing its party vote between the 2012 and 2017 legislative elections, nearly a quarter of Brazil's electorate switched its 2018 party vote from the 2014 election.[ii]

But the forces that produced the Yellow Vests—policy convergence between the mainstream center-left and center-right parties, voter dealignment and party system volatility, and new media serving as surrogates for organizational structures—had failed to produce a successful populist and anti-establishment movement in France. After all, it was the centrist Emmanuel Macron who took advantage of potential party system collapse to capture the presidency and National Assembly, and not the populist Marine Le Pen, much less a movement like the Yellow Vests. What had made the difference between protests in France and populist victory in Brazil?

Unaffiliated Voters: Increasingly Hostile Toward Established Political Parties

The long-term process of policy convergence, voter dealignment, and party system volatility in established democracies since at least the 1970s has created a large pool of voters hostile to existing political parties. On the "demand" side, the declining working class share of the electorate has

This is the third in a series of occasional papers by the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program looking at the declining influence of political parties worldwide. For more information, please see: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication-series/happ-occasional-papers.

decreased the electoral viability of parties of the center-left; a more educated electorate increasingly uses its own judgment rather than party labels to make its electoral choices; and the unusually peaceful and prosperous conditions of post-war Western Europe has allowed voters to explore post-materialist values of identity and self-expression outside the traditional left/right class axis. On the "supply" side, parties have become less reliant on mass membership to mobilize voters, depending on paid consultants and pollsters to better reach voters directly through new media such as television; moderated left/right distinctions to converge on economic policy to better compete for the growing middle-class share of the electorate; and used their privileged position in the state to discourage new entrants through campaign finance and media regulations that favored incumbent parties.[1]

This created a large pool of "dealigned" voters who felt no mainstream party represented them, making these voters open to outsider candidates and parties. For example, Carlos Meléndez and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser found that the share of Chile's electorate without any affinity for the major political parties has nearly doubled since the mid-1990s, from 35 to 60 percent. This change was driven in large part by the halving of identification with the center-left Concertación coalition and its successor, which in the 1990s adopted some market-friendly policies traditionally associated with the center-right. Meléndez and Kaltwasser also found that a greater share of the electorate had negative feelings toward both major center-left and center-right coalitions (13 percent) than had positive feelings toward either (eight and five percent, respectively).[iii]

Voters' hostility toward the established parties can be so strong as to override other considerations, such as preferences for economic redistribution or limiting immigration. Steven Van Hauwaert and Stijn Van Kessel's study of nine European countries found that individuals holding populist attitudes—including extolling the will of the people and disdaining elected officials and compromise in politics—were indeed substantially more likely to support populist rather than mainstream parties. Their research also found that, with the exception of those with the most left-wing economic or right-wing cultural policy preferences, individuals' support for populist parties was better explained by their anti-establishment populist attitudes than by their left/right policy preferences.[iv]

Chile's experience shows that, even in a country without a major populist party, a sizeable share of the electorate—perhaps one-eighth in Chile's case—is so disaffected toward mainstream political parties that it is potentially primed to support a populist alternative. What causes voters' latent hostility toward mainstream parties to become active support for populist parties?

Populism: An Anti-Establishment Reaction Stoked by Voters' Sense of Unfairness

More than dissatisfaction with politics as usual, individuals' feeling that they and other members of their shared identity group have been treated unfairly by elites has been a driving force in populist mobilization historically. Cas Mudde has described populism as an ideology that envisions society as being composed solely of two homogenous groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Robert Barr found that populism has emerged in Latin America in part because of voters' sense that their own group was being treated unfairly. This sense of unfairness can emerge when mainstream political

[1] For more information, please see the previous in this series of occasional papers by the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program looking at the declining influence of political parties worldwide: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-trouble-political-parties-and-the-rise-the-yellow-vests

parties, pursuing elite policy consensus, fail to protect those outside elite circles from downward mobility.

The original populists emerged in the United States in the late 1800s in reaction to Washington's de facto adoption of the Gold Standard in 1873, part of the 19th Century's wave of globalization.[v] American farmers saw the prices of their commodities fall as the US Treasury restricted the money supply to maintain the Gold Standard. A tight money supply benefitted the bankers who had financed the Union cause during the US Civil War, ensuring inflation would not eat into the returns on the bonds they held. Guaranteeing these Northeastern bondholders' returns came at the cost of impoverishing farmers in American South and West, who began to organize against the mainstream political parties and elite interests that defended the Gold Standard. The Populist Party held its first national convention in Omaha, Nebraska in 1892, with a platform calling for an expanded money supply and a new system of credit to ease farmers' plight; it also blamed mass immigration for bringing down wages.[vi]

The United States was one of many Western countries affected by the Long Depression of 1873-1896, when tight money supplies after the adoption of the Gold Standard contributed to the collapse of agricultural commodity prices in several European countries. Karl Polanyi observed that Western European countries, in response to popular pressure, instituted protectionist policies to help shield their populations from unemployment and economic uncertainty resulting from these financial globalization shocks. Even the formerly free-trade Berlin adopted protectionist tariffs and created the world's first welfare state by implementing social protection programs. And Western European countries' migration laws could serve as a safety valve against unemployment and unrest. [vii]

As in the 19th Century, populists have emerged in the 20th and 21st Century as anti-elite movements, driven by voters' sense that mainstream parties on both the left and right had failed to protect voters from social and economic uncertainty. This failure stemmed from parties, regardless of ideological persuasion, following similar policies—policies that were often determined by governments' pre-existing agreements with supranational interests rather than through domestic democratic deliberation. Populist politicians on both the left and right have been able to mobilize voters who believed that their groups' socioeconomic status had eroded over time, as economic and social benefits increasingly accrued to elites.

Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have described populism as a "thin-centered" ideology because it has a small number of core concepts that are open to interpretation and fall short of an overarching worldview, in contrast to "thick-centered" ideologies such as fascism and socialism. Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that, for this reason, populism requires a "host ideology" if it is to offer answers to all of the political issues of the day.[viii] Populisms' ideological malleability allows populist politicians, in their drive to mobilize support, to define who belongs to the "pure people" in their struggle against the "corrupt elites"[ix] along either left-wing lines defined by class or right-wing lines defined by ethnicity.

Populism in Latin America: Left-Wing Incorporation of the Previously Marginalized

In Latin America, political entrepreneurs have more often used left-wing populism as an ideology to incorporate previously marginalized groups into the state.[x] Populist presidential candidates have benefited from electoral rules in many Latin American countries, where an outsider candidate in a divided field can capture the presidency in a runoff. And the most recent wave of populists emerged in reaction to the failings of import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies and unpopular austerity

imposed by international financial institutions, while populists have sustained themselves in power with the help of a global commodities boom.

Scholars of Latin America point to three waves of populism in that region: "classic" populism that first emerged in the 1930s and 1940s as politicians sought new ways to mobilize the increasingly enfranchised urban masses;[xi] a second wave of "neopopulism" that emerged amid hyperinflation in the 1980s and 1990s, mobilizing support for more market-oriented policies using anti-establishment, populist rhetoric;[xii] and a third wave that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s in reaction to the neopopulists' austerity.[xiii] Barr argues that, in this most recent wave of left-wing populism in Latin America, widespread corruption and the sense that one's own group was being treated unfairly were preconditions for successful populist candidacies, creating a pool of voters who felt disaffected toward the mainstream political parties.[xiv]

Barr points to the rise of Evo Morales in Bolivia as being illustrative of this dynamic: party system institutionalization declined in the 2000s as the major parties converged on economic policy. Public trust in government similarly deteriorated, and perceptions of corruption increased as the government appeared to be more responsive to foreign than domestic interests; La Paz had sold off water and natural gas reserves to foreign companies and, under pressure from international financial institutions to balance the budget, raised taxes on average Bolivians rather than raising royalty fees on companies extracting natural gas. After a series of anti-government demonstrations in the early 2000s, Morales was able to ride a wave of anti-establishment discontent with a populist message that a corrupt elite were benefitting at the expense of the people. Although Morales had broad electoral appeal, indigenous people—who were frequently the core of the anti-government protests—were overrepresented among his supporters.[xv]

Activating previously marginalized groups such as indigenous people has been key part of recent left-wing populist mobilization in Latin America. Because of restrictions on the franchise for much of its history, Latin America has long had significant gap between the share of the population that was registered to vote and the share of the population that had reached voting age. Democratization in the 1980s and 1990s increased enfranchisement and expanded Latin America's electorate, with countries like Ecuador and Peru eliminating literacy requirements by 1980.[xvi] By the early 2000s, all of Latin America's voting age population was essentially registered to vote.[2] Just as Latin America's populists in the 1930s mobilized the urban masses that had previously been excluded from elite politics, so too did its populists in the 1980s and 1990s mobilize voters who had lacked connections to their countries' traditional political parties.

Similar to the expansion in social protection in Western Europe in the wake of the Long Depression, many Latin America governments reacted to the economic disaster of the Great Depression with nascent ISI policies, including high import duties to insulate their countries from the unpredictability of the global economy. These high import duties helped maintain governments in power, including those of populists like Juan Perón, in part by serving as a source of patronage to dole out to those with connections to the mass political parties. Even as subsequent governments cut social spending, by the 1980s, these autarkic and statist development policies had created widespread debt crises and

[2] For more information on the difference between the share of votes cast in Latin America by registered voters and the share of votes cast by the voting age population, please see Appendix A.

hyperinflation throughout Latin America.[xvii] Kurt Weyland argues that neopopulists in the 1980s and 1990s sought to mobilize the segments of the population that had benefitted the least from decades of ISI: the rural poor and informal workers,[xviii] few of whom were affiliated with the major parties through membership in unions or the civil service.

Even as neopopulists incorporated a greater share of the population into the electorate, their market-oriented policies further undermined the support base of political parties, particularly on the center-left. For example, in Venezuela from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, the unionized share of the workforce declined by nearly two-thirds, from 40 to 15 percent. The public sector shrank by more than a quarter, from 22 to 16 percent. At the same time, the informal share of the workforce increased by nearly half, from 34 to 49 percent, and unemployment nearly doubled from six to 11 percent – making informal and unemployed workers 60 percent of the workforce. A former leader of Venezuela's center-left Acción Democrática party would later admit that the party never developed a strategy to incorporate members of the growing informal sector.[xix]

By the mid-1990s, Venezuela had experienced nearly 20 years of economic crises that disproportionally harmed the lower and working classes, and the average Venezuelan had little regard for the mainstream parties that had enacted a series of similar market-friendly policies as their standards of living declined. Six percent of survey respondents had confidence in political parties while 91 percent lacked confidence; less than a quarter would claim to be members of a political party, down from nearly a third at the beginning of the decade. When left-wing populist Hugo Chávez ran for president in 1998, he was unconnected to any political party or the policies of market liberalization.[xx] The poor and lower-middle class, many of whom were part of the growing numbers of informal or unemployed workers outside of traditional political parties' constituencies, would go on to support Chávez by wider margins than any other sector.[xxi]

Chávez, along with Bolivia's Evo Morales, was able to win election to the presidency with a clear majority of votes. But other populist presidential candidates benefitted from Latin America's widespread use of two-round presidential elections, in which the top two candidates proceed to a second round in the event no candidate secures an outright majority. Such systems can permit candidates with low levels of support to advance to the second round if the field is sufficiently divided. Left-wing populists like Argentina's Nestor Kirchner in 2003 and Ecuador's Rafael Correa in 2006 won their respective presidencies after failing to secure even a quarter of the vote in the first round; in both elections, at least four other candidates secured a minimum of 14 percent of the first round vote.[xxii]

Once elected, many populist governments were able to sustain themselves in power through the global commodities boom of 2002-2008, driven by China's and India's rising demand for raw materials to fuel increased production. Sebastián Mazzuca notes that the ample hydrocarbon and other mineral wealth in the Andean countries where populists took power by the 2000s—Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela—created opportunities for governments to expropriate wealth in boom times; in Argentina, the potential revenue stream was an expanding market for soybeans. Mazzuca argues that these countries' "rentier populists" essentially struck a political bargain with their largely informal sector supporters by economically incorporating them into the state through redistributive social spending. In return, supporters would become politically incorporated into the state by voting for the populist presidents as well as mobilizing in the streets to intimidate economic and political losers of wealth redistribution.[xxiii]

Populism in Europe: Right-Wing Mobilization of the Downwardly Mobile

In Europe, political entrepreneurs have more often used right-wing populism as an ideology seeking to preserve the socioeconomic status of the downwardly mobile—those who are at the low, but not lowest, end of the social hierarchy who fear falling even further in status. Right-wing populists have historically been less successful capturing power than their Latin American counterparts[xxiv] in part because of the widespread use of proportional representation (PR) in Europe. PR more accurately translates votes to seats than Latin America's winner-take-all presidential elections, although populist parties are increasingly entering European governments as junior partners. Right-wing populists' success has come as the decline of the welfare state has made working class voters more vulnerable to downward mobility.

Similar to the three waves in Latin America, Klaus von Beyme has identified three waves of right-wing populism in Europe: a brief initial postwar wave in Germany and Italy with links to previous far-right governments, buoyed by nostalgia in times of economic crisis; a second, anti-tax wave occurring largely in France in the 1950s and 1960s; and a Europe-wide trend that began in the 1980s[xxv]—one that is associated with the increasing political salience of immigration issues, according to Cas Mudde.[xxvi]

Just as a perception that one's own group was being treated unfairly was a common driver of support for populism in Latin America, multiple studies suggest that support for right-wing populist parties in Europe is driven largely by resentment of socioeconomic changes threatening one's precarious status. Daniel Oesch's study of five Western European countries has found that members of low-status groups like production and service workers, and to a lesser extent small business owners, are more likely to support right-wing populists.[xxvii] This is consistent with other studies, which have found that support for right-wing populism is greatest among those with the lowest social standing[xxviii] and who feel they have failed to advance in life because of changing societal rules.[xxix] These social and cultural issues have more consistently explained support for right-wing populists than immediate economic concerns,[xxx] such as being a social welfare recipient,[xxxi] among the long-term unemployed[xxxii] or concerned that immigrants depress wages.[xxxiii]

As deindustrialization has diminished the socioeconomic status of manual clerical and lower-level service work, particularly for men without college degrees, the rise of postmaterialist cultural values—which prioritize issues of identity and self-expression—has created more opportunities for previously marginalized groups like women and ethnic minorities. As the share of women participating in the labor force of advanced industrial democracies rose from 54 to 71 percent between 1980 and 2010, women were increasingly entering into highly-paid professions just as men were entering lower-paid jobs in professions previously dominated by women.

Threats to working class men's social status and accompanying cultural changes increased their hostility to outgroups such as ethnic minorities and immigrants; for example, members of the French working class help sustain their individual senses of dignity by drawing sharp distinctions between themselves and North African migrants.[xxxiv] Some studies have found that anti-immigrant sentiment and voting is economic, deriving from less-educated male workers' concerns that unskilled immigrants are a source of cheap labor that will depress wages,[xxxv] but cultural concerns—that that immigrants from culturally distant backgrounds undermine a nation's culture—are also necessary to explain anti-immigrant sentiments.[xxxvi] For example, studies that looked at individual-level data find no correlation between

individuals' anti-immigrant attitudes and the presence of immigrants in their communities. In fact, they found that individuals who overestimated the share of the national immigrant population were more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes.[xxxvii]

Right-wing populist voters may take a country's increasing immigrant population as a sign of cultural change. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart suggest that socially conservative, older Europeans living in more ethnically homogeneous rural areas feel as if they have become "strangers in their own country."[xxxviii] A separate study of social class in Britain found that the traditional working class was the group least engaged with "emerging cultural capital"—popular rather than traditional high culture, such as the internet and social media, sports, or rap and rock music.[xxxix]

Right-wing populists rose as the European welfare state declined. In the immediate post-war period in Western Europe, a unique set of historical circumstances coincided to produce an unprecedented period of economic growth—to include "catch-up," as European economies had more room to grow after being set back by capital destruction in the two world wars and collapse of trade in between. This high growth enabled the rise of the welfare state in Europe, as both management and workers cooperated to defer their present incomes to make investments in the future. Workers agreed to moderate their demands for higher wages as management re-invested in their firms rather than paid out dividends, and governments rewarded workers' wage restraint with greater social welfare policies such as work retraining, public job creation, and public pensions.[xl]

With the end of catch-up by the early 1970s, slowing economic growth reduced both workers' and management's willingness to cooperate in their social pact. Wage pressure and inflation increased, profit margins and investment fell,[xli] and the welfare state that had developed in flush times proved difficult to sustain. Parties of the center-left—which had been the primary architects of the welfare state—and center-right began to converge on market-friendly "neoliberal" policies that cut social protections. Members of the working class, which had relied on the welfare state to sustain their socioeconomic status, had no party to represent them, and increasingly turned to right-wing populists as the only parties that addressed their concerns.

Although populist parties have historically been shut of out executive power in Europe than in Latin America, their increasing vote share combined with growing party system fractionalization has led to more and more populist parties on both right and left serving as junior coalition partners. Within the EU 28, the average populist party is the third largest party in the legislature.[xlii] This frequently makes populist party support necessary for governance, especially if the top two parties are ideological opposites of the center-left and center-right. Although in 1998 populist parties were only in government in two European countries—Slovakia and Switzerland—populists by 2018 were in 10 cabinets, including holding the premierships of Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.[xliii]

These key elements—austerity and cuts to the welfare state, downward mobility, and fear of cultural change—were all factors in the rise of the Sweden Democrats (SD). In Sweden in 2006, a center-right coalition took power in Sweden after 12 years of Social Democratic rule and implemented a program of cuts to both taxes and social welfare. The program succeeded in its goal or raising the disposable income gap between gainfully employed economic "insiders" and economically vulnerable economic "outsiders"—those who were retired, unemployed or erratically employed, or on disability. Insiders' disposable income increased and outsiders' remained stagnant such that, between 2005 and 2012,

outsiders' relative disposable income had dropped 20 percent; before 2002, insiders' and outsiders' incomes had grown at roughly the same rate.

Mainstream political parties paid a price for economic outsiders' declining socioeconomic status. The SD in 2010 doubled its vote share from 2006 and entered the legislature for the first time with nearly six percent of the vote. By 2014, it would become the third largest party in the legislature by again doubling its vote share to 13 percent. Ernesto Dal Bó, Frederico Finan, Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne found the SD gained the most votes between 2002 and 2014 in municipalities with the highest share of economic outsiders.[xliv] Matthew Goodwin's work suggests the decline of class voting in Sweden had created a pool of working class voters for the SD to mobilize; the share of working-class votes for center-left parties had declined from 72 percent in 1968 to 51 percent by 2014.[xlv]

Social and cultural issues were key to the SD's appeal. Dal Bó et al found no relationship between the share of a municipality's votes for SD and its share of immigrants, and noted that the SD's electoral breakthroughs occurred before Europe's 2015 migration crisis.[xlvi] A separate study by Kristi M. Jylhä; Jens Rydgren, and Pontus Strimling found that, compared to supporters of the mainstream center-left and center-right parties, SD voters had much more negative attitudes towards immigrants, post-materialist cultural developments such as feminism and vegetarianism, politics in general, and their future prospects. SD voters were also substantially more nostalgic than supporters of mainstream parties, being five to eight times less likely to describe the current decade as the best in Sweden's history while being 23 to 31 percent more likely to list any decade before the 1990s as the best.[xlvii]

Populists Surge When Financial Crises Undermine Public Trust

Populist parties in both Latin America and Europe have had significant vote shares since the 1980s[xlviii] because the main drivers of their supporters' feelings on unfairness have endured for decades: widespread perceptions of corruption in Latin America, and manual workers' downward mobility in deindustrializing Europe. However, populist parties can receive short-term boosts in support during economic crises, particularly during deep recessions. Economic crises tend to increase voters' concerns with their immediate well-being and reduce their trust in mainstream parties; at the same time, economic crises sap the political power of center-left social democratic parties, creating openings for outsider parties.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have found that the degree to which individuals hold postmaterialist attitudes—that is, the degree to which they stress issues of identity over issues of material well-being—tends to be stable over time. However, economic downturns can lead individuals to temporarily make their immediate material well-being a higher priority. [xlix] This greater concern over immediate well-being may come from decreasing trust in national institutions, which have failed to protect individuals from economic and social upheaval.

Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch suggest financial crises in particular may depress trust in national institutions more than other recessions because they tend to be more severe, and they demonstrate elites' irresponsibility by their failure to carry out the government oversight necessary to avoid such crises.[l] A study by the Center for Economic Policy Research did indeed find that Europeans' trust in national legislatures declined sharply after the financial crisis of the Great Recession,[li] and David Doyle found that low trust in political institutions like the legislature and political

parties was strongly associated with electoral support for populist presidential candidates in Latin America.[lii]

Beyond temporarily shifting voters' "demand" for traditional political parties, economic crises change the short-term "supply" of parties in part by undermining organized labor, the support base for many center-left social democratic parties. Donald Sassoon noted that massive unemployment during the Great Depression weakened labor unions, and their allied leftist parties in Western Europe failed to make significant electoral gains.[liii] In a similar vein, Robert Blanton, Shannon Lindsey Blanton, and Dursun Peksen have found financial crises in developing countries weaken unions, as firms increase their labor law violations in response to shrinking profit margins and decreased government capacity for oversight.[liv]

The primary political beneficiaries of economic downturns are anti-establishment parties, particularly on the far right. Alan de Bromhead, Barry Eichengreen, and Kevin O'Rourke found that, in the 1930s, a shrinking economy was associated with a greater subsequent vote share for far-right, anti-establishment parties in Europe, particularly in countries in which the Great Depression lasted the longest.[lv] Examining effects of recessions caused by financial crises in advanced economies between 1870 and 2014, Funke et al found that far-right parties increased their vote shares 30 percent for up to five years afterwards. Support for these new entrants was the result of considerable vote-switching from established political parties, as the average number of parties in the legislature increased 10 percent over the same period.[lvi]

Yann Algan, Sergei Guriev, Elias Papaionannou, and Evgenia Passari found similar dynamics in the wake of the Great Recession: lower trust in national legislatures and more votes for anti-establishment parties, particularly in the hard-hit region of Southern Europe. The distinctiveness of Southern European countries, where unemployment rates reached twice the European average, is striking: it was in Southern Europe that far-left parties increased their vote shares the most, whereas far-right parties increased their vote shares the most in the Northern and Central European countries where unemployment increased more moderately or not at all.[lvii] This further suggests that left-wing populists mobilize the marginalized, like the unemployed, whereas right-wing populists mobilize groups threatened by fears of downward mobility and cultural change, rather than actual economic privation.

"Bait-and-Switch" Policy Reversals and Corruption Scandals Create Largest Opportunities for Populists

Beyond the significant support base for populist parties that had emerged by the 1980s or its temporary surge during financial crises, party system collapse creates the largest opportunities for populist parties to gain power. Party system collapse—or the transformation of a country's party structure, such as the effective number of parties, and the decline of its major parties[lviii]—can arise from programmatic policy reversal once in office or from high-level corruption scandals.

Kenneth Roberts argues that the party systems of several Latin American countries—including Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela—collapsed after parties of the center-left enacted market-friendly policies associated with parties of the center-right. These programmatic policy reversals once in office—"bait-and-switch" reforms, in Roberts' description—and the unpopular austerity they required led to mass protests and declining support for both the major center-left and center-right parties.

Party system volatility in these three countries increased between eight and 23 percentage points from the 1980s to the 2000s, with more than 40 percent of their electorates switching party votes between the average national legislative election. By 2010, parties formed after 1990 would earn nearly 60 percent of the votes in many of these countries' legislative elections. The beneficiary in each case was a new left-wing populist president and his party: Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Each of their governments would subsequently reverse market reforms to a much greater degree than other Latin America parties of the center-left that came to power in the 2000s.[lix]

The collapse of Italy's party system in the 1990s came about not through center-left parties' adoption of center-right policies but the revelation of long-standing corrupt practices that helped maintain a centrist coalition government. Beginning in 1992, Milanese prosecutors' "Clean Hands" investigation systematically exposed the party corruption that was presumed to have existed for years, in which Italy's ruling political parties received kickbacks on government contracts to fund party operations or enrich party members.[lx] By 1998, 4,000 people would be investigated, 1,000 indicted, and 400 convicted in the investigation.[lxi] The Clean Hands investigation would implicate, among others, senior members of the long-governing center-right Christian Democracy (DC) party and its frequent junior coalition partner, the center-left Socialist Party of Italy (PSI).

The DC and PSI were wiped out in the 1994 legislative election, in which more than 40 percent of the electorate would switch its party vote from the 1992 election.[lxii] The DC in particular was largely replaced in southern Italy by Forza Italia (FI), the party of right-wing populist Silvio Berlusconi; however, much of FI's support came from across the political spectrum from anti-ideological voters more concerned with crime, economic development, and personal insecurity than the mainstream parties. Although he campaigned as an outsider distinct from the corrupt political class, Berlusconi may have also been motivated to enter politics out of concern that investigations of official corruption would uncover connections to his media empire, and FI would indeed attempt to shield him from prosecution as prime minister.[lxiii]

The Rise of Bolsonaro

Brazil by 2018 featured many of the signs of declining political party influence in other long-standing democracies, including those that had given rise to the Yellow Vest protests in France: policy convergence between the center-left and center-right, voter dealignment with the reduction of policy choices, increased electoral system volatility as unaffiliated voters were drawn to new parties, and the use of new media by political outsiders to mobilize support. Unlike France, however, Brazil had additional features that made voters feel as if elites were treating them unfairly, boosting support for an anti-establishment populist outsider: an economic recession and a major corruption scandal that exacerbated voters' fears of social change and downward mobility.

After the reelection of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2006, party system volatility in Brazil increased, with more voters switching support to new parties. The Chamber of Deputies became increasingly fractionalized as new parties entered the legislature, with the effective number of parties—the number of parties weighted by their share of the vote—nearly doubling between 2003 and 2018, from a little more than eight to more than 16.[lxiv]

Party fractionalization led to large governing coalitions of strange ideological bedfellows and contributed to greater policy convergence between the major parties. In its time in power between 2002 and 2018, the ruling and center-left Workers' Party (PT) built coalitions of up to 10 parties,[lxv] with the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB) frequently playing the role of key partner. By 2014, the PT controlled only 13 percent of the seats in the legislature, and Marcus André Melo and Carlos Pereira estimate that the ideological distance between the president's party and its coalition by the mid-2000s was four times larger than it had been in the mid-1990s.[lxvi] During the center-left PT's time in power, its policy positions closely resembled those of the center-right opposition Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) on economic, foreign policy, and social welfare issues.[lxvii]

To maintain the cohesion of unusually large governing coalitions, governments can patch over ideological differences by doling out patronage, as occurred in Italy during years of center-right and center-left cohabitation. And similar to Italy's "Clean Hands" investigation, the "Operation Car Wash" investigation by Brazil's Federal Police revealed the corrupt practices that helped hold the PT coalitions together: a massive kickback scheme inside the national petroleum company that had funneled billions of dollars into the election campaign funds of the PT and its allies.[lxviii] By November 2014, officials from six parties—including the four largest parties in the Chamber of Deputies—were under investigation for their involvement in the scheme, and by 2017, roughly half of the members of Congress faced charges.[lxix]

The widespread corruption revealed in the Car Wash investigation and a sharp economic recession helped create a sense of unfairness among key voting blocs, including the previously marginalized, whose rise halted below a level they'd come to expect, and the middle class, who feared downward mobility. By 2014, the PT had overseen a dozen years of job creation and expanding social welfare programs. However, the overwhelming majority of the jobs were low wage, and PT's social spending failed to significantly increase workers' quality of life because it focused on conditional transfers through the Bolsa Família program at the expense of broader education, healthcare, or urban transportation infrastructure spending.[lxx] Workers' growing discontent with their quality of life came to a head in June 2013, when millions took to the streets in protests that originated over rising bus fares; 2013 would experience more than 2000 strikes, nearly one-and-half times the number in 2012.[lxxi]

The previously privileged middle class also grew disenchanted with PT rule because of the threats to their socioeconomic status. The middle class actually shrunk under PT rule because of the decline of the industrial sector and the expansion of contract work. The tight labor market in Brazil's boom years also increased financial pressure on middle-class households as the costs of services—particularly for domestic servants—rose accordingly. And the rising status of workers brought them into increased competition with the middle class economically over jobs as well as culturally, with workers a growing presence in social spaces like shopping malls that had catered to the traditional middle class.[lxxii]

Cultural issues had become increasingly salient to Brazil's political competition as parties' economic policies converged and the status of previously marginalized groups rose, exemplified by the 2010 election of Brazil's first female president, the PT's Dilma Rousseff. In the course of the 2010 campaign, the opposition PSDB had criticized Rousseff's past support for efforts to decriminalize abortions as a way to distinguish itself from the PT, with which the PSDB shared many policies.[lxxiii] Opposition to abortion was a message the PSDB had picked up from Christian groups, which were growing in influence in the legislature. By 2016, 15 percent of legislators were part of the cross-party Evangelical Parliamentary

Front, a sectarian grouping equivalent to the third-largest party in the legislature. This "bancada evangélica" increasingly found common cause with interest groups representing landowners and the gun lobby, introducing legislation to define families as exclusively heterosexual, roll back protections of indigenous lands, and overturn restrictions on gun ownership.[lxxiv]

These cultural issues came to the fore during an economic recession in 2014-2016, the longest in Brazil's history, and increasing urban violence, with 64,000 homicides in 2017.[lxxv] The crisis would deepen middle class resentment towards the Rousseff government, while the government's fiscal adjustment and austerity policies in response would undermine its support among the working class.[lxxvi] Amid declining support for the government, Brazil's Chamber of Deputies would impeach and remove Rousseff in 2016. Her PMDB successor and former vice president Michel Temer, facing approval ratings that dropped to the single digits as well as corruption charges,[lxxvii] did not stand for reelection. As the 2018 election approached, most of the traditional political parties had been discredited by the corruption scandal, a lingering recession, declining standards of living, and cultural changes accompanying groups' changes in socioeconomic status.

Jair Bolsonaro, a long-standing deputy for a minor political party, took advantage of this political opportunity. Just as many of Europe's right-wing populists attracted support from "petty bourgeoisie" small business owners, Bolsonaro's right-wing populist message was particularly attractive to a key demographic subject to downward mobility: middle-class men with no political affiliation. Lacking a well-established political party, Bolsonaro would mobilize these and other supporters with a lively social media presence; between 2014 and 2018, he was the most active federal deputy on social media, and his 93 million Facebook interactions were nearly half again as many as popular former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.[lxxviii] Bolsonaro would go on to be elected president in 2018 in a time of potential party system collapse, as nearly a quarter of the electorate would switch its vote from 2014 as voter turnout continued to decline.[3] Much of this vote-switching would benefit Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party, which would gain ten percentage points on its 2014 vote to become the second largest party in the legislature.[lxxix]

What Does the Rise of Populism Mean for Democratic Governance?

Populists like Brazil's Bolsonaro came to power amidst widespread political dysfunction, where policy convergence, voter dealignment, and electoral system volatility combined with other factors that had prompted populist backlash against the elite: sense of unfairness caused by group marginalization or downward mobility of previously privileged groups, economic crises, and corruption scandals. To many voters, populist parties offer the promise of addressing their countries' deep-seated issues of unfairness.

But what is the track record of the average populist party in the legislature or even in power? Does it re-energize democracy by re-engaging voters who had previously dropped out of the political process? Or does it harm democratic development by polarizing politics and rolling back checks on government authority to better implement the "will of the people"? The next in this series of occasional papers will examine the impact of populist parties on democratic governance, with some leading to increased representation of underrepresented groups, but at the cost of voter engagement and, of even greater concern, democratic durability.

[3] See Appendix B for data on voter turnout and party system volatility in Brazil, 1998-2018

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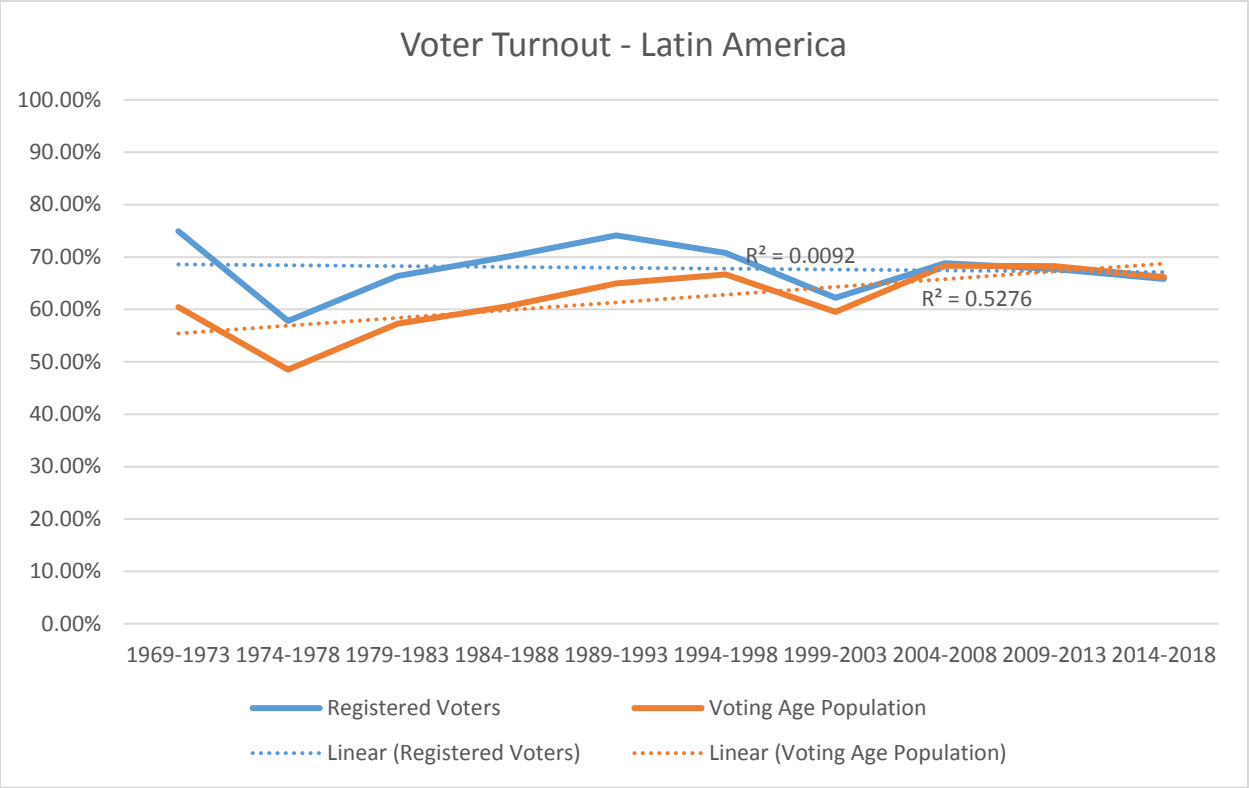
Appendix A: Voter Turnout in Latin America, Registered Voters and Voting Age Population



For all countries with a minimum of political party competition, or political competition greater than 3 on Polity's 10 point scale.

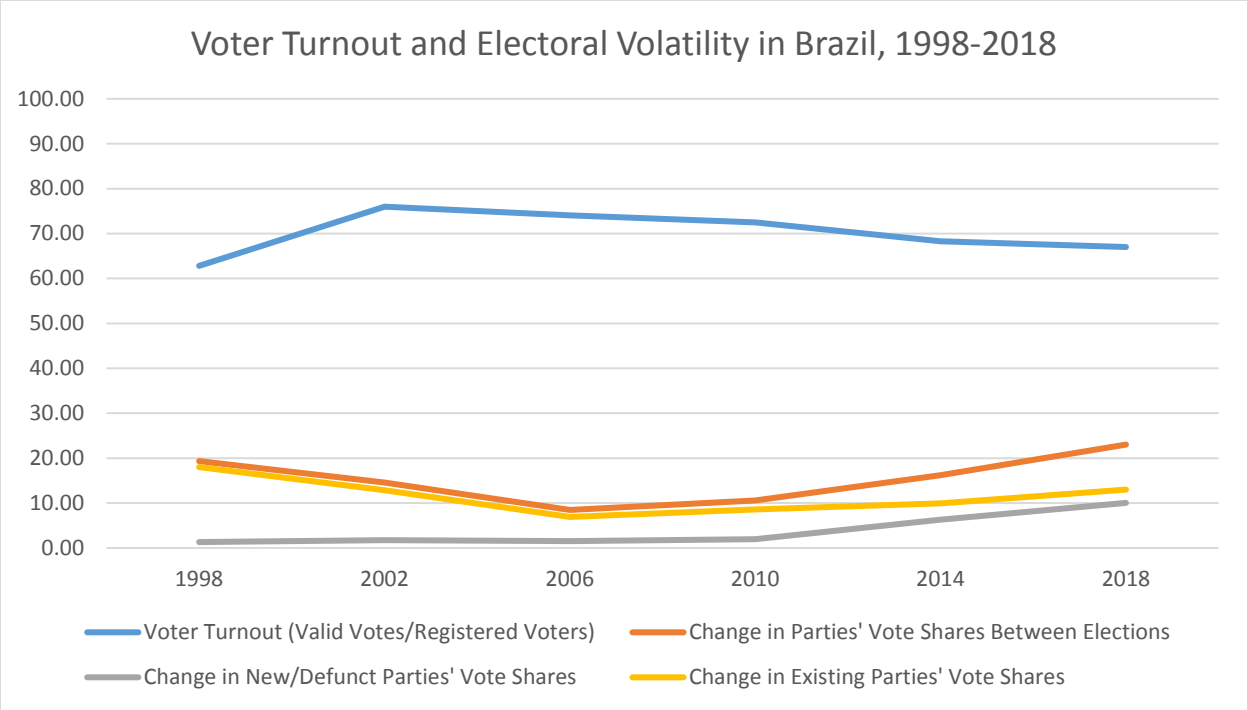
Note that Voting Age Population is an estimate, and therefore may sometimes be higher than the share of the population that is actually registered.

Sources: Turnout data from https://www.idea.int/

Political competition data from https://www.systemicpeace.org/index.html

Through September 2018

Appendix B: Voter Turnout and Party System Volatility in Brazil, 1998-2018



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