Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective

Populism is best understood as a Manichaean worldview linked to a characteristic language or discourse. Chavismo, the movement that sustains Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, is a paradigmatic instance of populism. Using a novel cross-country dataset on populist discourse, combined with extensive data from within Venezuela and across other countries, this book demonstrates that populist movements can be understood as responses to widespread corruption and economic crisis. The book analyzes the Bolivarian Circles and government missions in Venezuela, revealing how populist ideas influence political organization and policy. The analysis provides important insight into the nature of populism, including its causes and consequences, and addresses broader questions about the role of ideas in politics.

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Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective

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# Contents

List of Tables page vii

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

1 Introduction 1

2 Chavismo, Populism, and Democracy 15

3 Measuring the Populist Discourse of Chavismo 50

4 Party System Breakdown and the Rise of Chavismo 86

5 The Causes of Populism in Comparative Perspective 131

6 Populist Organization: The Bolivarian Circles in Venezuela 166

7 Populist Policy: The Missions of the Chávez Government 195

8 Conclusion 231

Appendix A: The Populist Speech Rubric 251

Appendix B: Test of the Sampling Technique 255

Appendix C: Test of Interaction Effects 259

References 263

Index 287
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Average populism scores for Latin American chief executives</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Average populism scores for non–Latin American chief executives</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Union density in Latin America</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Responses to “country’s most important problem”</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Multinomial logit of vote choice (issues)</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Multinomial logit of vote choice (candidate attributes)</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Multinomial logit of vote choice (full model)</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Estimated probabilities of voting for Chávez</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Multivariate regressions on populism</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Predicted level of populism, given corruption and economic growth</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Attitudes toward regime types</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Democratic methods</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Content analysis of definitions of democracy</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Attitudes toward social change</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Membership in organizations and activities</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Missions by origin and area of emphasis</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Expected attributes of the Missions</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Data sources on the Missions</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Model results for Missions</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1</td>
<td>Analysis of random samples of Lula and Cárdenas speeches</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.1</td>
<td>Multinomial logit of vote choice (with interaction)</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This book was born out of the last stages of my dissertation research nearly 10 years ago. I first traveled to Venezuela in 1999 to study why the traditional system of political parties had broken down. For several months I interviewed former party leaders and scholars of traditional Venezuelan politics, a process that gradually educated me in the history and workings of the old Punto Fijo system. However, as I worked, it became clear that something new and important was taking shape in Venezuela, something that very few academics were studying yet. This was the movement led by Hugo Chávez, or “Chavismo,” which was taking the place of the old party system.

Seeing Chavismo as the real story was my first step in a process of discovery; the second step came when I began to understand the distinct qualities of Chavismo as a populist movement. My academic training is in the “new institutionalism,” meaning that I study the causes and consequences of formal rules and political organization, particularly political parties, using rational-choice theory. Hence, when my first interviews of Chavista leaders took place in December 1999, I focused on the leadership of what was then the movement’s official party, Movimiento V República or MVR. My attempts to analyze Chavismo were essentially descriptions of MVR’s organization and ideology. However, in early 2003, a colleague invited me to present a conference paper discussing Chavismo as an example of populism. This was an unfamiliar concept to me, and as I explored this academic literature, I was introduced to a set of ideas that gave me extraordinary understanding of what was happening in Venezuela. I began to see that Chavismo went well beyond the confines of MVR and that most of the action was taking place outside the party. This was a populist movement, and the party played only a minor role in the larger workings of this different kind of organization.

I also began to see the potential for studying the concept of populism, one that has been particularly vexing for social scientists. By treating populism as a discourse or worldview – as a set of fundamental beliefs subconsciously expressed and shaped by language – I could understand how Chavismo had transformed Venezuelan politics, what had given rise to the movement, and
what its implications were for politicians and policymakers. It also seemed to challenge or at least elucidate the dominant rational-choice approach to political science that my colleagues and I used, highlighting an additional set of ideas or meanings that were essential for understanding political behavior. But the concept needed clarification and had never been quantitatively measured or treated in significant comparative perspective. I decided to write a book about Chavismo and populism that would allow me to do this.

Most of the data in this book have been collected since then. In June–July 2004, just prior to the presidential recall election, my students and I conducted the survey of members of Bolivarian Circles found here in Chapter 6. The data on the government’s social programs (Chapter 7) were collected during July 2005. In spring and summer 2006 I conducted the cross-national analysis of populist discourse that provides much of the comparative data in this book. Finally, in August–September 2007 I cooperated with the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University in conducting the first version of the AmericasBarometer in that country, a source of some of the data found here in Chapter 7 on the government’s social programs and later in the Conclusion.

The recent emergence of other populist movements in Latin America that are strongly linked to Chavismo (including the one led by Evo Morales and the indigenous Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia, and the PAIS Alliance of Rafael Correa in Ecuador) makes my earlier decision seem prescient. Populism is becoming a catchphrase again among academics, policymakers, and journalists. However, much of the old conceptual confusion still prevails, and the potential for the discursive concept of populism to enhance our scientific understanding of politics – not just in Latin America or developing countries, but in the advanced industrial democracies as well – is largely unrealized. I hope this book will shed light on these other movements and provide a template for expanded approaches to the study of political institutions and ideas.
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I

Introduction

The provision for recall referendum is ... giving shape to a new democratic model in Venezuela, not the old democracy of the elites.

Hugo Chávez, June 2004

On 3 June 2004, Venezuela’s National Electoral Commission (Consejo Nacional Electoral, or CNE) announced that a recall election would be held against President Hugo Chávez in August.

The announcement marked a significant victory for the opposition after years of tumultuous, polarizing conflict. Earlier, in April 2002, a violent clash between opposition demonstrators and government supporters in Caracas precipitated a military coup that removed Chávez from power for 36 hours. Subsequent efforts at reconciliation failed, and for two months the opposition led a devastating national strike that paralyzed the oil industry and much of the private sector. Finally, in May 2003, after negotiations sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS), representatives of the government and the opposition signed an agreement committing both sides to a legal, non-violent solution and opening the way for the presidential recall.

The recall process formally began with a signature drive by the opposition from 28 November to 1 December 2003. The effort generated an overwhelming response in favor of the recall, with 3.4 million signatures collected,

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2 The following account draws from multiple sources, especially the Comprehensive Report by The Carter Center, “Observing the Venezuela Presidential Recall Referendum,” published in February 2005 (The Carter Center 2005b), and reports on the election by Gutiérrez (2004), McCoy (2005), Kornblith (2005), and Hellinger (2005), as well as my own observations and campaign literature that I collected. Totals for the UBEs and electoral patrols are taken from Chávez’s speech at the close of the campaign. Information on the structure of the Comando Maisanta, as well as Chávez’s 3 June speech, was downloaded from the presidential Web site http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve.
well beyond the 2.5 million required by the constitution. The process nearly stalled after the CNE took five months to verify the signatures and then, in a controversial decision, found irregularities in over 900,000 of them. After violent demonstrations by members of the opposition and earnest efforts by the Carter Center and the OAS, the CNE and opposition agreed to allow a new “repair” period at the end of May in which affected citizens could reaffirm their initial signatures. At the completion of this new process, the CNE accepted that sufficient signatures had been collected and made its announcement.

The opposition’s hard-fought victory was short, however. On the evening of 1 December, Chávez appeared on television and gave a speech that reclaimed the moral high ground. He publicly accepted the CNE’s decision and affirmed his movement’s unwavering support for democracy, then defiantly called on his supporters to organize and defeat the opposition. He baptized their effort the Campaña de Santa Inés, naming it after a historic battle from the Federal Wars in the nineteenth century when the Federalist forces defeated the conservative oligarchs following a brilliant tactical retreat. The acceptance of the CNE’s decision was a replay of that retreat, and the people would again triumph over the conspiring forces of the opposition. Chávez recited passages from Florentino y el Diablo, a Venezuelan folk ballad in which a cowboy named Florentino is challenged to a singing duel with the Devil; Florentino courageously accepts the challenge and eventually defeats the Devil through his perseverance and wit. Chávez asserted that the coup-mongering leaders of the opposition were the Devil, and behind them was the biggest devil of all, George W. Bush. The government of the United States was “the black hat, the black horse, and the black banner, the real planner and driving force of all these movements that have attacked us.” Florentino – Chávez and the people – would answer their challenge and win.

The response to Chávez’s call was extraordinary. During the next two weeks, Chávez passed over his regular party apparatus that had been losing popular support and created a new campaign organization, the Maisanta Command, led by key figures in the government. The command was named for a guerrilla fighter from the turn of the nineteenth century who was purportedly a grandfather of Chávez and one of his personal heroes. The Command organized a separate grassroots structure of over 8,000 precinct committees known as Electoral Battle Units (Unidad de Batalla Electoral, or UBE), many of them constituted by Bolivarian Circles that had organized during the previous three years. These committees coordinated the work of nearly 120,000 “electoral patrols” (patrullas electorales), each made up of approximately 10 voters, that sprouted from community organizations associated with the movement. Over the next two months the electoral patrols carried out neighborhood voter education and registration drives, posted campaign literature, organized rallies, and kept a scrupulous count of voters on election day. The campaign made massive use of print and electronic media campaigns built around a highly consistent set of slogans and images.
related to the themes of Santa Inés and Florentino y el Diablo. Banners and balloons labeled “NO” (a negative vote would retain Chávez) festooned highways, walls, and government buildings across Venezuela. The government’s advertisements repeatedly emphasized the successes of its new social programs and the purported ties of the opposition to the old party system and the Bush administration.

The opposition’s campaign was a pale shadow of the government’s, and it seemed to falter and lose its momentum from the start. Many in the opposition were lulled into a false sense of security by the success of the initial signature drive and early polls indicating low levels of approval for Chávez. Their umbrella organization, the Democratic Coordination (Coordinadora Democrática, or CD), failed to offer a clear program for policy change or select a replacement candidate (if successful, the recall would require a new open election), thereby fueling uncertainty about their unity and their capacity to govern. They took weeks to choose their own campaign command, ultimately a committee of 13 heads of parties and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). And they failed to carry out any grassroots organizational effort, relying instead on television-style campaigning that belied their claims to popular support. As the election approached, their own polls indicated that support for the recall was slipping and that Chávez was gaining ground among undecided voters.

By election day, the turnaround for Chávez and his movement was complete. Nearly 10 million Venezuelans cast their vote, an extraordinary 50 percent increase in turnout from the presidential elections of 2000. Chávez scored a resounding victory, with 5.8 million votes (59 percent) to the opposition’s 4 million (41 percent). He and his movement would remain in power until at least 2006.

This account of the recall election of 2004 raises several questions that are often voiced about “Chavismo,” or Chávez and the movement that supports him in Venezuela. Let us consider just a few of them.

First, in the recall campaign and especially in the two years that led up to it, we see the polarization of an electorate in what was once regarded as one of the most stable representative democracies in Latin America. From 1958 to 1998, Venezuela had a peculiar democratic regime known as the Punto Fijo system, named for a pact signed by key political actors during the democratic transition of 1958. This pact committed all parties to respect the outcome of subsequent national elections while implementing a set of redistributive economic development policies fed by the nation’s oil wealth. Although the system that emerged was characterized by the predominance of a few hierarchical, disciplined parties that largely monopolized access to oil rents, it enjoyed a high level of peaceful electoral competition and regular turnover that made Venezuela an apparent model of democracy. The country was a striking contrast with other nations in Latin America that experienced electoral fraud and violence, polarization between parties of the right and left, and periods of

With the rise of Chavismo this exceptionalism ended. Venezuela was transformed into a polarized party system with two camps that saw each other as enemies in a cosmic struggle. The opposition made frequent recourse to nonelectoral means to challenge Chávez, while the government chiseled away at the civil liberties of its opponents and openly used public resources to win elections. Many political institutions that previously had some shred of autonomy (or at least offered proportional representation to the different parties) were turned into organizations allied with Chávez’s views that frequently excluded or ruled against the interests of the opposition. Yet, throughout this conflict, both sides continued to frame their goals and tactics in terms of democratic principles, and they ultimately hewed to minimal procedural standards that gave elections a degree of democratic legitimacy. What explains this “unraveling” of pluralistic norms and institutions, especially in a country such as Venezuela, where they seemed so firmly entrenched (McCoy and Myers 2004)?

Second, we cannot help but be impressed by the mobilizational capacity of Chavismo. In a matter of two weeks, the government was able to call out and organize as many as 1.2 million activists for its recall campaign. Even if the government’s estimates of campaign organization were inflated, the number of grassroots activists was clearly much higher than that of the opposition. What impresses us is not just the number of activists, but also their dedication and willingness to set aside competing goals in order to support Chávez. What explains this extraordinary capacity for mobilization and organization?

Third, of course, the recall campaign raises the issue of Chávez’s international ambitions and his growing conflict with the United States. This is most evident in his rhetoric linking the opposition with Bush and the purported efforts of the United States to extend its capitalist imperialism. Already by 2004, Chavismo had become part of a broader international conflict involving other Latin American and world leaders in a kind of anti-liberal-democratic front. In large measure, Chávez had acquired Fidel Castro’s mantle of authority as leader of the radical left in Latin America. What fueled the animosity of Chávez and his allies toward the United States and capitalism?

Finally, we encounter Chávez’s extraordinary, inflammatory rhetoric. Although made particularly famous for English speakers in his 2005 speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly comparing Bush with the Devil, his discourse emerges here with its demonization of the opposition and its exaltation of the government’s project as the embodiment of the popular will. His words evoke comparison with the Manichaean discourse of other historic leaders – Juan Perón’s famous 1946 campaign speech proclaiming the “liberation” of the Argentine people and urging them to choose “either Braden or Perón” (Perón n.d., 60); Getúlio Vargas’s depiction in Brazil of the choice between “the nation’s existence and the situation of chaos,” or Arturo Alessandri’s warnings that the options in Chile were “either Alessandri as
President or the Revolution” (Drake 1999, 65). Is this rhetoric erratic and irrelevant – window dressing for opportunistic leaders with authoritarian ambitions – or something more consistent and significant for understanding the movement?

Together these questions highlight the fact that Chávez and his movement represent an extraordinary transformation of Venezuela’s political system with ramifications for the entire region, if not beyond. For some scholars and policymakers, Chavismo is the greatest threat to representative democracy in the region and the greatest challenge to U.S. interests in Latin America since the end of the cold war (Noriega 2007); for others, Chavismo embodies hope for social justice and an end to the legacy of colonialism in Latin America and the rest of the developing world (Dossani and Chomski 2007). Yet, most of us are still a little unsure of what exactly the movement is. Is Chávez merely another military caudillo or a democratic revolutionary? Is his movement the product of a yearning for democracy, a reaction to economic policy failure, or an inevitable response to the challenges of globalization in an oil-based economy? Is his government reproducing old patterns of clientelism and top-down forms of political organization or opening society to participatory forms of democracy? In short, how should Chavismo be categorized, what is causing it, and what are its consequences for Venezuela and the region? The immediate purpose of this book is to answer these three overarching questions.

The main argument of this book is that Chavismo and many of its allied movements in other countries are best understood as instances of “populism.” This is a controversial word to use in Venezuela and in much of Latin America, not to mention among social scientists. By “populist,” I do not mean that Chávez and his movement are demagogic, that they have shortsighted economic policies, or that they represent a particular step along the convoluted path to modernization – although Chavismo and its allies may be all of those things. Instead, I mean that they have a distinct set of political ideas. Populism is a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political world – a worldview or, to use a more rarified term, a “discourse” – that perceives history as a Manichaean struggle between Good and Evil, one in which the side of the Good is “the will of the people,” or the natural, common interest of the citizens once they are allowed to form their own opinions, while the side of Evil is a conspiring elite that has subverted this will. Wholesale institutional change – “revolution” or “liberation,” although rarely full-blown social revolution – is required in order to restore the will of the people; procedural rights (especially those of the opposition) may be treated as secondary concerns or instruments. All of these ideas are expressed in a characteristic language identifiable not through a particular lexicon, but through such diffuse elements as tone, metaphor, and theme.

Populism is not entirely undemocratic. Chávez and his supporters see sovereignty resting in ordinary human beings and argue for the expression of their will through elections and other mechanisms of direct participatory democracy. But populism is not pluralist. Dissent is not regarded as a valued, permanent
feature of politics, especially if it means disagreement with the goals of the revolution or the authority of Chávez. Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of Chavismo and other populist movements: their ability to use democratic ideals to question fundamental democratic practices. Populism represents one end of a normative dimension of politics that partially cuts across traditional procedural definitions of democracy in Venezuela and other countries. This dimension captures the political intentions of leaders and activists and helps us predict the direction in which they are likely to take their regimes.

Many scholars, journalists, and policymakers use the word populist to describe Chávez and his movement, not to mention the other historical instances to which I have compared them. In my review of about 40 academic journal articles published between 2000 and 2006 that study Chávez, I found that about half also use the word populist or populism. But none of these observers really clarify the meaning of this term or why it applies to Chávez, and they ultimately fail to say what it reveals about the unique causes and consequences of Chavismo, let alone how these relate to similar movements in Latin America or the rest of the globe. I argue that populism in the ideational sense allows us to answer all three of my research questions and sheds light on movements in other countries.

In terms of categorization, subsequent chapters demonstrate that the concepts of populist worldview or discourse neatly capture Chávez and his movement, as well as a few other historical and current regimes that are frequently considered populist. Chavismo is a paradigmatic populist movement whose leader and many of its followers share an antagonistic outlook that divides and polarizes Venezuelan society. Populism, moreover, is a much deeper and more consistent attribute of Chavismo than is the movement’s increasingly leftist ideology. Chávez’s leftist rhetoric of “twenty-first century socialism” has clearly become an important characteristic of the movement in the past few years, one that affects decisions about policy and organization as well as the kind of allies and enemies it creates at home and abroad. Yet, the movement’s Manichaean discourse was present much earlier – from the very moment that Chávez and his allies emerged on the political stage – and it has remained a surprisingly strong feature up to the present.

Seeing populism as a set of ideas also helps us identify Chavismo’s causes. Populist movements such as Chavismo are not merely the product of economic crisis, globalization, or growing demands for participatory democracy, although these factors often contribute. Rather, populist movements become successful when there is a widespread failure of government to implement rights of citizenship, particularly the rule of law, that allows citizens to characterize their governments as corrupt. Venezuela experienced just such a failure after the oil boom of the 1970s. Not only did traditional politicians and their parties prove incapable of preserving economic growth and equity once oil revenues declined, but they displayed gross moral weakness in repeated scandals and halfhearted attempts to punish dishonest politicians. The message of populists like Chávez is an appealing normative response to these
kinds of political failures. It frames them as part of a cosmic struggle of an idealized people against their elite oppressors and gives new meaning to democratic politics and dignity to ordinary citizens. Yet, populist movements typically prove incapable of solving these underlying problems. This is because they disdain the institutional formalities and impartial bureaucracies that the rule of law requires, a pattern we see repeated in Chavismo today. Hence, populism is a recurrent problem in developing regions such as Latin America, which manifest weak property rights and high levels of corruption, while it is largely absent or relegated to the fringes of politics in advanced industrial democracies.

Finally, defining populism in ideational terms helps us better identify and appreciate the consequences of Chavismo. The discourse of populist movements is indeed more than rhetorical window dressing; it reflects an underlying worldview that shapes the choices of leaders and followers as they organize themselves and implement policies. Most populists sincerely believe in the virtues of folk wisdom and direct, spontaneous expressions of the popular will, and they fear the corrupting influence of professional political organization. Hence, Chavismo has tended to remain a movement rather than a single hierarchical organization, and efforts to impose unified organizational structures have prompted schisms and fierce debate among movement activists. Chavistas sometimes struggle to reconcile their reverence for the charismatic leader with their belief in popular empowerment and autonomy. Yet, populists also feel a powerful need to demonstrate popular approval and counter what they regard as a sinister, illegitimate opposition. Partly because of this belief, the Chávez government has implemented major social policies with an idiosyncratic partisan logic that often works at cross-purposes with purely electoral goals. In allocating discretionary resources, for example, the government often fails to exploit opportunities to create a patronage machine or engage in open vote-buying, and it creates programs whose rhetoric actually drives away some undecided voters.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As should be evident, this is an argument with much broader implications than just an understanding of Chavismo and Venezuela. Each of the three specific research questions – categorizing Chavismo, explaining its causes, and understanding its consequences – requires that we address three similar areas of inquiry in the subfield of populism studies. And each of these, in turn, touches on general theoretical questions from the field of political science concerning the role of ideas in political behavior. In all of these areas, we will see that defining populism as a worldview or discourse adds to our understanding and points us to dimensions of politics that are often overlooked and poorly understood.

The first and most significant contribution to the broader scholarly literature is conceptual and empirical: not only to specify a particular ideational
definition of populism, but to defend it on logical grounds as a superior, minimal definition of the concept, and to defend it in practical terms by showing how it plays out across countries and across time. The study of populism is fairly old but lacks consensus on basic issues of definition and operationalization. Even with the definition of populism championed here, few scholars have tried to measure populist discourse to see if it really exists, especially in any kind of comparative context (c.f. Armony and Armony 2005; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). I demonstrate the power of this definition by showing how it encapsulates well-known structuralist, economic, and political-institutional alternatives. These other definitions describe significant causes and consequences of populist beliefs and discourse, such as movement organization and shortsighted macroeconomic policies, but the attributes they describe are logical corollaries of the worldview rather than populism’s defining characteristics. By placing ideas at the center of populism, we can better understand the causal mechanisms that link these other phenomena together while identifying populism’s overlooked aspects.

I also demonstrate the practicality and robustness of the ideational definition through a novel effort at measurement. After applying traditional qualitative discourse analysis to the case of Chavismo, I use a quantitative technique from educational psychology known as holistic grading to analyze a much larger sample of leaders. This technique uses whole-text analysis of political speeches and turns out to have both high validity and good reliability. The resulting dataset reveals the existence of a populist discourse across different periods of time and in multiple countries and languages, and it demonstrates that populist discourse is a reasonably coherent and consistent phenomenon that can be measured scientifically.

The second contribution of this book is a better explanation for what causes populism. That is, what causes populist movements to emerge successfully at certain times and in certain places? Over the years scholars have suggested several explanations, including economic crisis, disjunctures of modernization, and dependent development, yet none of these have been tested simultaneously or with any kind of quantitative analysis. I show that all of these theories fail to get at the heart of populism because they ignore its normative underpinnings. As a discourse or worldview, populism is ultimately a way of interpreting the moral basis or legitimacy of a political system, and it makes the most sense to politicians and citizens when there is widespread violation of democratic norms, especially the rule of law – as there was in Venezuela in the late 1990s and as there is today in many other developing countries. Severe policy crises alone can reduce support for incumbents, but they cannot undermine support for constitutional orders unless they are plausibly linked to a systematic abuse of public office that can be characterized as corruption. Charismatic leaders provide essential catalysts for organizing successful populist movements (as I put it later, they help determine the supply of populism), but they have to give the right message in order to mobilize voter demands effectively. While a few discourse analysts have made similar causal
arguments (de la Torre 2000), they have traditionally been reluctant to test these theories, let alone rely on cross-national empirics or quantitative data. For that matter, few studies of populism using any other definition have been willing to do so either. I test my theory against extant ones by looking at the particular case of Chavismo, where I use individual-level data and trace out causal mechanisms; and by looking broadly across countries, where I gauge aggregate patterns with a moderately sized dataset. This analysis validates the normative theory of populist movements while finding that more traditional theories lack predictive power.

The final contribution to the broader literature is a set of theories on the consequences of populism, in particular its consequences for organization and policy behavior. These are subjects that receive relatively little attention from scholars studying populism. In the case of political organization, I present a more comprehensive set of attributes that goes beyond the qualities emphasized in political-institutional definitions by tying populism to the phenomenon of social movements. One of the implications of this study is that social movements in the classical sense, and the related concept of “contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), derive as much from the worldview of movement participants as they do from participants’ resource constraints. Movement organization embodies populists’ advocacy of direct democracy and the virtues of ordinary citizens. Populists organize as a movement because they want to, not merely because they have to.

In the case of policy behavior, I examine theories of discretionary spending and poverty alleviation programs to show that broad choices over policy – such as how program resources will be allocated, and whether they will emphasize radical redistribution or the protection of property rights – are contingent on the outlook of the politicians and their socioeconomic context. The kinds of partisan discretionary spending programs we often associate with populist leaders are not accidental by-products of weak institutions, but consequences of a perspective that seeks a popular movement for revolutionary change. Populists and their followers want these kinds of policies and see them as evidence of the movement’s power and intentions. Purely rational perspectives on political behavior that assume vote- or office-maximizing elites all too often ignore these underlying normative dimensions and thus much of what makes these spending programs so interesting and problematic.

Beyond these three contributions to the populism literature is a much more fundamental contribution to political science. This is the attempt to forge a more positivist approach to the study of “intersubjective,” “thick,” or “anthropological” notions of culture. This is more than just another reaffirmation of the idea that culture matters. Over the past decade or two, scholars have responded to the dominance of rational choice theory by engaging in a number of studies of the role of ideas in political behavior. Drawing heavily on the pioneering work of Weber (1958 [1946]) and Durkheim (1984), they urge us to consider the role that beliefs and motivations outside of our raw material self-interest play in our decisions. However, this rather broad effort breaks down
into warring disciplinary camps that often seem irreconcilable. On one side are postmodernists, discourse theorists, and constructivists who see ideas as socially constructed and inextricably linked to language (Wendt 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2004; van Dijk 2008); for these scholars, our shared language exerts an almost insidious influence on our thoughts and all too frequently serves as a justification for traditional social and international relations that are unethical or unjust. On the other side are rationalists or behavioralists. They agree that ideas play an independent causal role in human behavior, but they argue that human beings exercise considerable intentionality in creating their ideas, and that the objective material world strongly conditions what ideas are ultimately accepted and acted on (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

When we study populism, we are forced to consider both approaches to the role of ideas. This is because populism captures a different level of ideas than is usually the subject of recent research. Populism is not a set of principled beliefs such as our current system of human rights norms, nor is it a set of causal beliefs such as Keynesianism or neoclassical economics, both of which are conceptualized as relatively apparent aspects of culture capturing highly articulated sets of ideas (Hall 1989; Goldstein 1993; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Populism is a deeper aspect of culture that reflects basic, interrelated beliefs about history, the nature of self and the community, and the metaphysical. It is a worldview and is expressed as a discourse.

For behavioralists especially this is unfamiliar terrain. While several studies acknowledge the existence of worldview as a level of ideas capturing our deepest assumptions about how the political world works, they leave this level largely unexamined and instead focus on specific sets of norms, ideologies, and scientific theories. Worldviews and the thick sets of ideas that they represent are all too often treated as an unchanging background that we can largely take for granted. In the few instances where they are discussed at all, there is no real attempt to categorize or measure them (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Berman 1998). Ironically, for better guidance we must turn to the constructivists and discourse theorists who have given much more attention to these underlying sets of ideas, including especially those who study populist discourse (de la Torre 2000; Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005b). Their work here is much more advanced and provides most of the descriptive material we need to create a better definition and measurement of populism. They also provide a crucial methodological insight that the behavioralists or rationalists miss: the close link between ideas and language at this deep level. While ideologies and rhetoric may be easily separable, thought and language become almost indistinguishable when we begin to examine deeply held, unarticulated assumptions about politics. For many purposes we must treat these two concepts – worldview and discourse – as synonyms. This should not be taken as a strong endorsement of the constructivist position that our shared language is the principal cause of our ideas. Constructivists and discourse theorists too often assume what needs to be tested, namely, the dominance of language over thought and behavior. In the study of populism, I find commonalities across
historical periods and national boundaries that hint at more natural categories and more powerful material causes than radical interpretivist theories are generally willing to admit. These findings tend to confirm the traditional behavioralist or rationalist approach to ideas that sees them partly as a reasoned response to our objective conditions.

Thus, in this book I adopt a perspective on the study of ideas that attempts to build bridges between behavioralist approaches on the one hand, and discourse theoretical and constructivist approaches on the other, by studying a particularly deep aspect of our political ideas. Should this be taken as a more direct assault on rational choice theory? In explicitly studying a set of ideas—populist discourse or worldview—I necessarily argue against traditional rational-choice accounts that assume purely material self-interested voters and politicians. We cannot understand Chávez and his movement, or the reaction of his opponents in Venezuela and abroad, without taking into account a fuller set of beliefs. At several points in the text, especially when I study the consequences of populist ideas for political organization and public policy, I juxtapose my predictions with those of traditional rational-choice accounts in an attempt to show that populist ideas not only exist but that they really matter for politics.

Yet, this is not a world in which interests disappear, nor is it one in which citizens and politicians operate erratically or without regard for their material constraints. The explanation I offer for populism’s causes and consequences tends to contradict newer cognitive approaches to decision making. These approaches are sometimes used to explain populism by seeing it partly as a response to changing risk aversion in an environment of “losses” or impending calamity (Weyland 2003). Instead, the theoretical arguments here are better characterized as a soft or thick version of rational-choice theory (Little 1991, 41). Much of what goes on with Chavismo and other populist movements can be explained as a rough type of rationality based on nonmaterial preferences, rather than irrational behavior that subconsciously ignores or misperceives readily available information or that short-circuits the decision-making process when choices are framed a certain way. While I do not present anything resembling a formal model, I am friendly to the view that citizens and politicians can be treated as reasoning individuals in the pursuit of their political ends.

While there are several scientific reasons for making reasoning individuals the starting point in the study of populism and Chavismo, such as theoretical parsimony or the still underdeveloped state of cognitive research programs, I have an additional normative purpose in mind. Much of the scholarly literature treats populism as a failure of rationality in the fullest sense of this phrase: as a pathology of democracy, a “paranoid mentality” that afflicts citizens and politicians (especially those of the less educated lower classes) who have ceased to reason and have given themselves over to their passions (Shils 1956; Le Bon 1960 [1895]; Hofstadter 1966). Within Latin America, critics of populism have long treated it as the deception of uncultured masses
by demagogic leaders rather than as a justifiable, conscious response to corruption and policy failure (see Di Tella 1965). I am not saying that any of these empirical claims are wrong or that we cannot make moral, philosophical judgments about the merits of populism and its troubled relationship to democracy. One of the purposes of this book is to analyze and test these claims. However, we need to be careful about the kinds of signals we send our audience with our choice of methods and words. The carefully delineated notions of rationality and irrationality that we use as scholars are sometimes lost once our work leaves our hands, and they play to the fears of populism’s less careful critics. If we have any choice about which theoretical perspective to start with as our baseline – and I think we do – then a rationalist one is more politically productive. It sends an important signal to populists that they are taken seriously, and it sends a signal to populism’s critics that they need to take it seriously.

METHODS AND OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

All of this means that this is an ambitious book. However, the case of Chavismo is such an extraordinary paradigmatic instance of populism that we would be poor scholars indeed if we failed to explore its broader implications in a variety of contexts. Readers who are more interested in understanding the particulars of Chavismo may feel put off by this comparative emphasis, but they should bear in mind that the knowledge payoff goes both ways. Our comparative excursions not only help us speak to a broader audience, but also give us greater insight into the case of Chavismo by putting the movement into a global perspective that is often missing in the study of Venezuelan politics.

Chavismo is a vast subject, and we can consider only a few aspects of the movement here. A number of edited volumes on Venezuelan politics under Chávez already draw on varied expertise and provide fine descriptions (Ellner and Hellinger 2003; McCoy and Myers 2004; Smilde and Hellinger forthcoming). Also, the potential value of this book as a reference work for policymakers seems inherently limited; Chavismo changes constantly, with new policies and new actors emerging almost daily. Much of the specific information presented here will be old news by the time the book is published.

However, I argue that by identifying the movement as an example of populism, we have a tool or a permanent template for understanding aspects that are not covered here, including those that emerge after the book is done. Thus, we do not have to describe and analyze every feature of Chavismo in order to understand the movement. We only need to provide a theoretical framework and test it in multiple ways that demonstrate its explanatory power and coherence. This approach is largely absent from recent volumes that study Chavismo, including the better edited compilations. While they provide excellent points of empirical reference for understanding Chavismo – indeed, I rely on their analyses in this book – they generally avoid a unified theoretical argument and the generalizable claims I make here.
How do I choose which parts of the movement to cover? Part of the time I am constrained by the limited availability of data. Key portions of the movement remain poorly organized, and the Chávez government jealously guards its information nowadays, at least at the highest levels. Thus, I cannot examine complete local budget allocations for the government’s social programs, and I can only survey limited samples of participants in these programs and other movement organizations. At other times the selection is more deliberate. Wherever possible, I carefully choose themes and design the research to test more effectively the arguments of this book. My general approach is to wed narrow studies of Chavismo with broader comparative data, and within each of these to combine quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, for example, I follow a qualitative study of Chávez’s discourse with a quantitative study of populist discourse across 40 chief executives from different countries inside and outside of Latin America. And after exploring the causes of party system breakdown and the rise of Chavismo in Venezuela, I explore the causes of populism across a sample of 35 countries. Readers should not assume that the analyses of Chavismo are all qualitative, while the broader comparative work is quantitative. Instead, and in keeping with a growing consensus within political science, at each step of the way I employ both approaches (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Brady and Collier 2004; see also the special 2007 issue of the journal *Comparative Political Studies*). In a few instances, pieces of the empirical puzzle are missing and prevent us from implementing an ideal mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis and comparative versus case study methods. I acknowledge wherever this is the case.

Chapter 2 provides key background on Chávez’s movement, then explains and defends the definition of populism as a set of ideas. It expands the argument summarized in this chapter that populism as a worldview or discourse provides a minimal definition encapsulating older approaches. Populism defines one end of a normative dimension of democracy that cuts across existing procedural criteria of regime categorization, allowing us to distinguish among different types of hybrid democracies. This allows us to move beyond narrow debates over whether Chavismo represents an instance of true participatory democracy or something authoritarian, and instead treat it as a case of populist democracy with a natural tendency to slide into something totalitarian.

Chapter 3 is essentially descriptive and empirical. It provides data showing that Chavismo is a populist movement in the discursive sense and that Chávez in particular is one of the most populist leaders in the world today – hence a paradigmatic case of populism. Chávez’s discourse is remarkably consistent across time, much more so than his ideology or platform. The chapter shows this first by engaging in a qualitative analysis of Chávez’s published interviews and speeches, and then by presenting the results of an ambitious effort to measure populist discourse in the speeches of current and historically significant chief executives from other countries.

The next two chapters use the ideational definition of populism and the previously mentioned dataset to develop and test the normative theory of
populism’s causes. Chapter 4 focuses on the case of Chavismo and Venezuela’s party system breakdown, showing how both of these occurred in response to a crisis of democratic legitimacy triggered by economic stagnation but ultimately rooted in worsening corruption. The chapter provides qualitative data assessing its claims, emphasizing the increase in corruption in Venezuela during the oil boom of the 1970s and its perception by politicians, scholars, and citizens. And it tests this argument quantitatively by performing a statistical analysis of vote choice for Chávez in 1998. Chapter 5 then extends this theory to a cross-national analysis of populism using our comparative dataset of elite-level populist discourse. It confirms the utility of a definition of populism centered on ideas and finds that corruption is a better predictor of successful populist movements than economic performance, mass media and education, the challenges of globalization, or economic dependency alone. However, it also argues that our understanding of populism must take into account the supply of charismatic leadership in shaping populist movement success; otherwise, we cannot explain why so few countries experience populist movements at any given time.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the consequences of Chavismo’s populist worldview and allow us to bring some closure to the book by showing in detail how the discursive definition encapsulates traditional understandings of populism. Chapter 6 addresses the political-institutional perspective through an analysis of the Bolivarian Circles, a vast network of grassroots associations that constituted much of the movement between 2001 and 2004. The Circles had low institutionalization, organized as a movement rather than a hierarchy, adopted populist rhetoric and an “anything-goes” attitude, and undermined the cross-cutting affiliations typical of pluralist civil society. The chapter provides a rough theory of populist organization arguing that these attributes are not the defining attributes of Chavismo, but products of a populist worldview and the movement’s charismatic leadership. Chapter 7 studies the policy consequences of populism by analyzing the Missions of the Chávez government, an ambitious set of discretionary spending programs for addressing Venezuela’s social and economic problems. Through an analysis of program allocations and a survey of aid workers and recipients, it shows that the Missions reflect a unique partisan logic that excludes enemies and rewards the faithful without overt conditionality, a logic driven by the demands of populist discourse. It also explains the general leftist trend of the Chávez government that the Missions embody, arguing that the broader choice of economic approach should be seen as a consequence of populism interacting with the distribution of wealth in a given society; economic populism is a peculiar consequence of the populist worldview in certain countries and times.

Chapter 8 concludes by discussing the book’s implications for policymakers and social scientists. It starts by reviewing some of the contributions to the broader literature on populism and the study of ideas in politics and explores new avenues of research. It then offers some tentative predictions about the likely direction of Chavismo.
Chavismo, Populism, and Democracy

With Chávez, the people rule.

Slogan in the 2000 presidential campaign

To understand Chavismo, we need to know more about the movement’s origins and how it is depicted by other scholars. We also need to learn more about the basic concepts – populism, worldview, and discourse – that I will be using to describe and analyze Chávez and his movement. This chapter provides these conceptual and empirical foundations. While the emphasis of this chapter is largely on categorization, it provides the basis for and anticipates the causal arguments in subsequent chapters.

The main argument of this chapter is that the scholarly literature places Chavismo on an inadequate unidimensional spectrum of democratic procedure. Democracy, of course, is a fundamental objective for policymakers and citizens today, and in this book I employ the minimal procedural definition of democracy that many political scientists currently use: competition over ideas and candidates (“contestation”), broad participation, and at least a minimal set of rights to make these other conditions effective (Dahl 1971; Collier and Levitsky 1997). This is a definition centered on, though not limited to, the conduct of free and fair elections. Using this definition, we can classify Chávez’s Bolivarian government as a semidemocratic regime headed in an increasingly authoritarian direction. But to see what really makes Chavismo distinct from other democratic regimes and from the previous political system in Venezuela, we must complement this behavioral or material dimension with a cultural or normative one that considers the moral justifications for democracy. This dimension is defined primarily by two political worldviews or discourses: populism and pluralism. By taking this dimension into account, we can not only appreciate the unique attributes of Chavismo, but better predict the government’s likely procedural direction. This normative dimension is anticipated by but not developed in the current literature on democratic regime types.