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Populism and Liberal Democracies: Why Palin's Populism Won't Work

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Populism and Liberal Democracies: Why Palin's Populism Won't Work

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Populism and Liberal Democracies: Why Palin's Populism Won't Work

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	3
II. Defining Populism.....	9
III. The Populist Leader.....	21
IV. Analyzing Populism as a Democratic Mode of Governance.....	29
V. Populist Conceptions of ‘the People’	37
VI. Conclusions.....	47
VII. Bibliography.....	50

I. INTRODUCTION

Eight months after losing the 2008 election, ex-Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin quit her job as Alaskan governor. While this might signify her total removal from politics, the months following her withdrawal Palin defied this notion thrusting herself onto the national scene, publishing her memoir *Going Rogue* and beginning a nation-wide (self) promotional tour. Given her heightened visibility, the media has (not surprisingly) scrutinized Palin's every move concluding that she is a populist. The *New Yorker* ranks Palin's "insistent ordinariness" among other famed American populists such as William Jennings Bryan who "have always been divisive and polarizing."¹ Their [populists] job is not to win national elections but to carry the torch and inspire the faithful."² On the other hand, *Newsweek* characterizes her among a trend of "faux populists [that] feast on emotions—anxiety, anger, resentment—that intensify in hard times. . . more accurately described as plain old reactionaries."³ *The Daily Beast* calls Palin's appeal to the 'common American people' less than genuine as she tours the country in her private jet.⁴ The media cannot quite figure out Palin or populism; is she really a populist? And if so, what does that mean for American politics?

Populism has characterized various political figures throughout time and throughout the world. In the late 1800's The People's Party – an American populist party – emerged because of agrarian unrest. Also in the 19th Century, Russia saw populism manifest as a reaction to

¹ Sam Tanenhaus, "North Star: Populism, Politics and the power of Sarah Palin," *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2009.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jonathan Alter. "Enter the Foxulists: The Faux Populism of Palin, Dobbs, and Beck," *Newsweek*, December 7, 2009.

⁴ "Palin's Bus Hoax," *The Daily Beast*, entry posted November 29, 2009, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-11-29/palins-bus-hoax/> (accessed April 6, 2010).

Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs.⁵ Latin America has experienced waves of populism beginning with Argentina's Juan Perón, who created a lasting populist movement appealing to Argentina's working class. Recently, Latin America has experienced another populist surge via leaders such as Bolivia's Evo Morales, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Argentina's Kirchner administration. The term 'populist' has even infiltrated contemporary American politics with the emergence of Sarah Palin. Though all of these leaders and movements, along with others, fall under the populist umbrella, academic literature has trouble reaching a consensus on populism's definition.

To understand populism and its leaders, the term "populist" deserves clearer elucidation. When approaching literature on populism, most theories begin describing the difficulty that theorists have had defining the concept. Francisco Panizza opens his book with this disclaimer: "it has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lamenting the lack of clarity about the concept and casting doubts about its usefulness for political analysis."⁶ Given that the term populism has been ascribed to many leaders and movements, I do not doubt the utility in understanding the concept. Many theories present a laundry list of criteria, while others narrow the scope to geographic locations or time periods.⁷ I agree that these theories do little to theoretically clarify populism, but that does not mean other theories have not identified a theoretical understanding of populism useful for understanding the phenomenon. I hope to present both an accurate overview of various academic attempts to define populism along with my own conceptions of the phenomenon.

⁵ J.F Conway "Populism in the United States, Russia, and Canada: Explaining the Roots of Canada's Third Parties," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (1978), 113.

⁶ Francisco Panizza, introduction to *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, by Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 1.

⁷ In Francisco Panizza's Introduction he outlines various definitions that limit populism to geography or time, 2-17.

Instead of limiting populism to a specific ideology or time period, my approach analyzes populism as a movement that emerges under certain political conditions. Though certain populist movements share similar economic or political ideologies, what connects all populist governments is not these ideologies, but rather the way in which populism emerges. When a current government fails to address the needs of a large enough constituency it creates conditions ripe for populism. In other words, it is a movement, a reaction to a deficient political system. ‘The people’ feel neglected in some way by their government; the populist leader appeals to this, suggesting s/he can better represent their political desires. Using certain tactics, which I will later outline, these leaders present themselves as separate from the current establishment to win ‘the people’ over.

After more clearly defining the parameters of populism, I look at its manifestations through contemporary movements. Specifically I look to Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and former Alaskan governor Sarah Palin to demonstrate how they exemplify populism. Using these leaders I show how they embody all features of populist governance. These leaders operate in different contexts yet they all make similar political moves as they attempt to gain power. Both Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez fit into this framework and have both used populist tactics for political success. On the other hand, Palin exemplifies certain aspects of the populist leader, but has not yet demonstrated that she has wooed the American people. Yet, Palin still provides a useful example of the ways populist leaders conceptualize and relate to their people and perhaps in the future Palin will attain the political success of her peers; however, also I go on to argue that Palin – operating in a different political context than her contemporaries – will not have the same successes as other contemporary populists.

Given both populism and democracy's focus on representation and 'the people', some theorists argue for populism's place as a democratic mode of governance. After discussing the features of populism, I address this question of whether populism is a mode of democracy. My analysis discusses the way populism approaches representation, arguing that populism reflects a less democratic type of representation than liberal democracy. However, using Margaret Canovan's theory of populism as a shadow of democracy demonstrates how populism does fit within liberal democracy. Canovan argues that populism is an inherent part of democracy that manifests when democracy relies too heavily on institutions and not enough of the ideal of 'the people'. As I explain, I largely agree with Canovan's reading of populism as a reaction to the inherent elitism within liberal democracy, and therefore an inherent aspect of democracy. I also agree with her ominous terminology 'shadow' that implies populism is a negative reaction to liberal democracy's shortcomings in that the way it 'corrects' presents a worse democratic mode of governance than even elitist liberal democracy.

As discussed earlier, the idea that populist leaders represent the true will of 'the people' gives populism some claim to democratic legitimacy. Looking closer at the ways these leaders believe they represent their people lends insight into the type of democracy populists perpetuate. Populists often refer to 'the people', justifying their rule using the rhetoric of 'the people'. Via speeches, interviews and some secondary sources, I specifically look at how these leaders reference 'the people', in what contexts and how they later define 'the people'. This understanding of the ways populist leaders define their people demonstrates how these leaders relate to their constituencies and whom they try to represent when making political decisions and reforms, once elected. Additionally, looking at the way populist leaders conceive of their people, I argue that the populist 'people' differs from an American or liberal democratic understanding

of this term. Though there are many democratic conceptions of ‘the people’, I choose to focus on ‘the people’ as the electorate. Comparing the electorate to the way Morales, Chávez and Palin conceive of ‘the people’ demonstrates a key difference between populism and liberal democracy.

After making these general comparisons, I expand my findings to Sarah Palin and populism in the United States. Sarah Palin’s populism cannot succeed in America’s liberal democracy. The way populist leaders use the rhetoric of ‘the people’ to gain power demonstrates the power of such rhetoric in their given government type, country and political climate. As discussed above, populist leaders refer to a homogenized ‘people’ that have a specific legislative need that is not being met. The United States political system does not operate under the same terms. I suggest that the United States adheres to a liberal democratic notion of ‘the people’ that fundamentally differs from the populist notion. Therefore, successful American leaders must also abide by this notion. Though Sarah Palin does not fall into the “successful” leader category (yet), her actions and rhetoric qualify her as a populist. If she tries to appeal to a homogenized segment to gain political popularity, she will fail. Unlike Bolivia, a politically underserved homogenized majority does not exist in America – in other words our idea of ‘the people’ appreciates including diverse people from different cultural or economic backgrounds. At least ideally, Americans relate to each other because each has the power to vote. By contrast populists believe their constituencies relate on cultural or economic lines. Therefore, I hypothesize that for Palin to attain electoral/governmental success in the United States she would have to conform to the American notion of ‘the people’ as a heterogeneous electorate.

This paper will enhance democratic theory not only showing how populist rulers define this “democratic” term, but also how it fits in with democratic theorist’s definitions. My comparisons will demonstrate a more concrete understanding of the populist leaders appeal to

‘the people’, and therefore a relationship between populism and democracy. Not only does my research have theoretical importance, but it also has relevance for today’s world. Due to the success of recent populist movements, studying this movement/regime type adds greater understanding to these emergent governments. Populist governments are sometimes characterized as totalitarian dictatorships and are therefore perceived as a threat to liberal democracy. If populism presents such danger, a deeper understanding will help combat this threat. Or perhaps, populism does not present any sort of threat, but rather demonstrates a different understanding of democracy compatible with liberal democracy. Either way understanding populism is useful for contemporary politics. Even if populism presents a threat to liberal democracy, its call for increased participation of the politically disenfranchised deserves respect in that it points to the very real elitism that exists in liberal democracies. Whether genuine or not, populism calls for increased access and agency for the powerless. Though populism may not present the ideal solution to liberal democracy’s faults, it illuminates these problems and offers an alternative approach.

II. DEFINING POPULISM

Before analyzing modern populist leaders, defining populism is useful for understanding these leaders and this phenomenon. Instead of outlining certain characteristics that many populist governments share, I present a theory of populism as a movement that emerges under certain political conditions. What defines populism is not a specific ideology, but rather the way in which populist leaders attain power and stay in power. When the relationship between a government (the leaders and institutions) no longer satisfies a large constituency of the population, this creates a space for a populist leader to appeal to this underserved community. The populist leader uses certain tactics – mostly rhetorical – to demonstrate to the constituency the shortcomings of the current administration and how s/he can better appeal to this group. If the leader relates to the group, convincing ‘the people’ that s/he better represents its needs, s/he will succeed. After election, populist leaders attempt to maintain the relationship they have cultivated, instituting reforms that benefit the constituency – or at least give ‘the people’ more political agency. This next section will discuss the following features that all populist movements share, which make it an identifiable mode of governance. Specifically, that they can all be characterized as movements, rather than ideologies and that these movements emerge because of a deficient political system that allows a populist leader to emerge. Though conditions may exist in which populist can flourish, without a leader to mobilize ‘the people’, the movement will not manifest. This movement needs a leader who both separates himself/herself from the current administrations and also cultivates a special relationship between himself/herself and ‘the people’ thus creating an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Finally, once elected the leader institutes

reforms that solidify his/her relationship with the people, giving them more autonomy via increased political participation.

Daniel Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell define populism as “an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice”⁸ For them, populism is an “ideology” and therefore exists as a set of beliefs. I disagree with this term “ideology.” Ideology suggests a set of ideals, or a manner of thinking. Rather than an ideology, populism represents a style of politics. An ideology suggests that all populist movements base their movements upon the same tenets; however, looking at various populist movements we see that this is not the case. What connects all populist movements – unlike an ideology like Liberalism, or Marxism – is the way the leaders relate to the ‘people’, come to power and operate. Populism emerges out of a deficient political system that fails to serve a large homogenous set of the population, and is therefore more spontaneous and organic than an ideology. For example, the failure of the Argentine government to address the needs of the new industrial class facilitated Juan Perón’s populist movement. The government did not address the needs of this new working class by limiting union efforts to raise wages and prohibiting the existence of the Confederación General de Trabajo del República Argentina – a major labor union.⁹ Because of the inability of the government to address this large constituency’s need a space opened for Perón to mobilize these people, and create his populist movement. Therefore, it emerges out of necessity – because the system has reached a point that

⁸ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, "The Sceptre and the Spectre," introduction to *Twenty-First Century Populism*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.

⁹ Jeremy Adelman, “Reflections on Argentine Labour and the Rise of Chávez.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 11 (3 Sep., 1992): 247.

allows a populist leader to emerge and create or organize “the people”. All other populist movements are cultivated under similar conditions.

Unlike an ideology like Marxism or liberalism, specific ideals or tenets cannot be applied to all populist governments. Rather, each regime conforms to the perceived needs of its ‘people’. Specifically, populism conforms to the platform of its leader. Yves Mény and Yves Surel put it well, calling populism an “empty shell which can be filled and made meaningful by whatever is poured into it.”¹⁰ Populism conforms to the platform of its leader. Therefore, without the ability to pinpoint specific policies or ideals unique to all populist regimes, defining populism is more difficult than other government types. Paul Taggart put it aptly when he said: “populism has an essential chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment it occurs in.”¹¹ Though theorists define it as an ideology, populism is best described as a style of governance that emerges in certain conditions. I think understanding populism not as an ideology, but rather as a style of politics is essential for reaching an accurate definition. Once certain political or economic platforms are uniformly assigned to all populist governments, these theories of populism lose resilience. Understanding each populist movement apart from its specific beliefs provides a much clearer, more accurate and lasting understanding of the phenomenon.

Many theorists have related populism to a specific economic climate, theorizing that it emerges during periods of industrialization or modernization. For example, Germani sees populism as a “deviation in the standard path from traditional to modern society”¹² Lasch sees it

¹⁰ Yves Mény and Yves Surel, "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism," in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, by Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 6.

¹¹ Paul Taggart, introduction to *Populism*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press), 4.

¹² Taggart, *Populism*, 15.

as a “response to the crisis of modernity”.¹³ Shils believes that populism represents “the tension between metropolis and province”.¹⁴ By placing this type of restriction on populist governments, certain leaders that I would categorize as populist do not fit the mold. Populist governments have flourished during periods of modernization, but it is not a necessary component for a government to be considered populist. In short, industrialization came and went; populism persists. For example, the populist movements in Western European countries as well as Sarah Palin’s foray demonstrate that developed countries also produce this regime type. We have seen the institutionalization of populist regimes in Western Europe – an economically developed area of the world – during the twenty-first century, proving that populism is not limited to moments of modernization. Looking to Italy, Berlusconi’s government falls under the populist umbrella. Like other populist leaders he presents himself as part of ‘the people’ and not of the government “Berlusconi acts as if complicit with his audience, with the aim of appearing as the only sincere and worthy interpreter of what the man in the street thinks.”¹⁵ In Italy the ‘man in the street’ does not equate to the rural farmers unable to adapt to the quickly modernizing society, but rather the “middle class which he has never severed ties with” and “the most disadvantaged of the common people whom the parties and unions of the left have abandoned”¹⁶ The populist people can take on many forms. Economic constraints limit the populist people to ‘the poor’, which does not include these other groups.

Because rapid modernization causes rapid change, especially for certain established classes, some think populism acts as a backlash to modernization and a push for a return to

¹³ Benjamin Arditi, “Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (New York: Verso 2005), 72.

¹⁴ Panizza, *Populism and the Mirror*, 4.

¹⁵ Marco Tarchi, “Italy: A Country of Many Populisms,” in *Twenty First Century Populism*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 94.

¹⁶ Tarchi, “Italy: A Country of Many Populisms,” 95.

traditional lifestyle. I think that periods of modernization created a climate in which populism had the chance to flourish, but it is not a necessary factor. For example, as the U.S. moved away from an agrarian economy, the farmers felt displaced and underserved by the government, which focused on railroad and merchant interests.¹⁷ Any time a large homogenous group – like farmers – can band together, believing that their government has failed them, a populist regime can form. Therefore, in times of modernization, especially industrialization, large segments of the population felt neglected thus fostering the perfect environment for the populist leader to create a movement. However, modernization is not the only climate in which large homogenous populations can feel underserved thus creating a populist movement. Often, populist movements do emerge during times of economic unrest because groups blame their economic plight on the government's failures. For example, the economic oil crisis in Venezuela helped Chávez's populist platform because it created a space for his figure to emerge. The poorest people felt the economic failures most and blamed the wealthy political elites, who relied on oil revenues, for their situation.¹⁸ This distance allowed Chávez to emerge, organize a homogenized poor population, and run his anti-establishment platform.

Demonstrating how these economic ideologies fail to translate to all populist movements illustrates the danger in designating populism as an ideology. No specific economic or political ideology characterizes all populist governments, but rather, conditions that create a dissatisfied homogenous group suffice. More important than what types of climates cause a populist leader to emerge is the fact that a large underserved group exists. For populist movements to rise, a leader must have access to significant homogenizable group because a key component to

¹⁷ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, Volume Two Second Edition, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

¹⁸ Ronald Sylvia, "The Chávez Phenomenon: Political Change in Venezuela," *Third World Quarterly*, 24, no. 1 (February 2003): 65.

populism is the existence of a populist ‘people’. Or rather, the special relationship the populist leader creates between himself/herself and his/her designated people is essential to the movement. Rickard Lalander presents perhaps the most basic understanding of this relationship: “el populismo se caracteriza por la interacción directa entre el pueblo y la elite (o el pueblo y el líder).” [Populism is characterized by the direct interaction between the ‘pueblo’ (people) and the elite (or “the people” and the leader)].¹⁹ For Lalander, the key aspect to populism lies in the *direct* relationship between ‘the people’ and leader. In populist movements, leaders define ‘the people’ and form a distinct relationship with said ‘people’. Specifically, they use rhetoric to present themselves as of ‘the people’ and therefore better able to represent ‘the people’. By including themselves as a part of ‘the people’, ‘the people’ feel more connected to this leader than the current “elite” establishment. Demonstrating the underrepresentation of this mass (their people), they then claim to represent the mass in a more legitimate, meaningful and some might say democratic way. Populist leaders cultivate this direct leadership first by using rhetoric to relate to their people. They try to legitimate their position, luring their people using their language and including themselves as a part of ‘the people’. After winning over their constituency they then solidify a more direct relationship by removing barriers to political participation instituting more direct forms of participation like referenda.²⁰

By defining their people, the leaders create ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomies in their societies. The more economic focused philosophies claim populism always forms a ‘rural’ versus ‘urban’ or a ‘rich’ versus ‘poor’ distinction. This understanding limits populism to too narrow a

¹⁹ Rickard Lalander, “Algunas reflexiones sobre populismo, descentralización y Chavismo,” *Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina, y el Caribe, España y Portugal* 48 (Spring 2004): 9.

²⁰ Referenda are not a necessary feature of all populist governments; however, populist leaders must institute reforms that create a more direct democratic process. Often these leaders use referenda because they allow ‘the people’ more political participation and agency.

lens. Yes, certain populist movements, like the United States People's Party of the 19th Century, did divide society into a rural (farmers) and urban (merchants, railroad and industrial interests), but not all populist movements rely on this divide. However, the 'people' and its 'other' do not always have to reflect 'rural' and 'urban' differences, but can reflect other distinctions. For example, in Argentina Populism stressed the role of the urban worker; in Bolivia Morales focuses on the indigenous people. These other definitions confine Populism to a specific time period in which societies industrialize and develop. As demonstrated by current populist movements, a society's stage of development does not determine if a populist movement will emerge. Populist governments are more about a rejection of the current administration's inability to address 'the people's' needs and wants – a reaction to misrepresentation and underrepresentation – rather than a reaction to modernization. Therefore, the dichotomization depends on the circumstances in which the populist movement emerges and cannot be limited to 'rich' versus 'poor'.

The way in which the leader operates is essential to populism, therefore, without the leader populism could not exist. Ernesto Laclau presents a similar perspective suggesting populism manifests because of an ideology of the elite “[populism] occurs when one fraction of the dominant class seeks to establish hegemony but is unable to do so and so makes a direct appeal to the masses.”²¹ Unlike other definitions, Laclau believes that elites cause populist movements to develop. I agree with Laclau that populism emerges from the rhetoric of an elite. Unlike Laclau I do not think that this occurs because a dominant class cannot establish hegemony without the masses. The elite – or rather, the leader – understands the inability of the current administration to appeal to 'the people' and then organizes 'the people' by presenting

²¹ Taggart, *Populism*, 17.

himself/herself as an alternative to the establishment.²² Also, I believe unrest already exists within the masses, but without elite support a populist movement could not and would not emerge. I think that a leader who either is of ‘the people’ or claims to be of ‘the people’ uses rhetoric to legitimize his/her position and organize the masses.

Understanding the relationship between the leader and his/her people is key to defining populism. All populist leaders have very similar ways of cultivating this relationship. Specifically, they must present themselves to their people in such a way that garners their trust. One adjective that has often been used to describe populist leaders is “charismatic” or “personalistic” I agree that a populist leader must have charisma that resonates with his/her people, or else s/he could not maintain his/her position or his/her relationship with the masses.²³ The masses relate not to a particular party or ideology, but with what the leader represents and the way in which s/he conveys his platform. For example, during Argentina’s Juan Perón administration, ‘the people’ related to Perón so much so that his movement received the moniker “El Chávezismo”. Chávez defined a political movement, rather than the other way around. When people discuss the current Venezuelan political situation, they reference Chávez – not his party and not his movement (the Bolivian Revolution) – but the leader himself. This demonstrates that populist movements do not rely on ideologies, but rather the leaders that create the movement. Therefore, without a memorable or engaging personality, these leaders would lose their

²² I use the term ‘establishment’ in reference to the parties and people who hold political power. The populist leader refers to this group as a cohesive homogenous group and tries to oppose their power by creating a populist movement. Though they may not necessarily be a homogenous group that acts in unison, I choose to refer to them as such because this is how populist leaders operate.

²³ Kenneth Roberts, “Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin American: The Peruvian Case”, *World Politics* 48 (October 1995): 84.

connection to ‘the people’. Since populism relies on this relationship, without this specific personality type populism would fail.

The special relationship between the leader and the led also relies on the way in which the leader came to power. The leader must appear as a “political-outsider” – in the sense that they do not belong to institutionalized parties. Though Roberts claims the leader must bypass well-established institutions to gain power, as long as the leader presents himself/herself as outside of the institutionalized parties at the time, s/he can maintain the image he needs.²⁴ Certain populist leaders – Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales – have come to power using elections, which is an institutionalized form of representation. Though these leaders worked within the existing political system, utilizing the election process to gain power, they still present themselves as separate from the ruling administration.

More importantly than how the leader comes to power, is the way s/he is perceived in relation to the establishment. The masses have a resentful relationship with the established masses, therefore the leader must challenge this established political and economic elite. The leader must do this because ‘the people’ feel wronged, betrayed or unrepresented by this elite. Since ‘the people’ lost trust in the current administration, they rely on a leader who they perceive as separate from the corrupt government. Without this relationship between elites and masses, the leader would not succeed in mobilizing his populist movement. Some believe the masses must oppose a long-established differentiated ruling class. Earlier populist movements opposed long established ruling classes; however, it is not necessary that the leader oppose a very established regime.²⁵ As long as the populist leader comes from outside the current political

²⁴ Roberts, “Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism”, *World Politics*, 84.

²⁵ Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), 100-101.

establishment, s/he can present himself/herself legitimately to his people. For example, consider Argentina's Carlos Menem who came to power after the unpopular Raul Alfonsín. As the first democratically elected president of Argentina after the military regime, Alfonsín did not come from a long-established party system. However, Menem still appeared as a political outsider in the way he presented his political platform to 'the people'. As long as the leader presents himself/herself to the electorate as distinct from the current dominant political establishment, s/he maintains his special relationship with 'the people' and is considered a populist leader. Also, I think this underestimates the importance of the leader's role. Without the leader to define and organize 'the people', the populist movement could not succeed.

Not only do all populist leaders have certain commonalities, but also the populist 'people' has specific shared characteristics. The leader presents himself/herself in the specific ways outlined above in order to win over his/her 'people'. I have referred to the populist people as an "underserved homogenous group". Though the populist leader essentially defines his/her people, using rhetoric and the above outlined methods (presenting himself as a political outsider, as one of 'the people'), 'the people' has to relate to one another on some level too, or else the leader would not succeed. I suggest that this group must be homogenous because the leader refers to his/her people as a homogenous entity, and if the leader hopes to succeed electorally, 'the people' has to give into his/her rhetoric. For example, Morales discusses his constituency as the indigenous population. Using this term homogenizes his/her constituency. Since, the Bolivian indigenous people can relate to each other on this cultural level and also to the leader, Morales has succeeded. The leader demonstrates to this homogenous group that the current establishment has not served the group's needs as a whole. If the group were not homogenous, these methods would be less effective. Since the leader presents himself/herself as both a political outsider and

as a part of said 'people', 'the people' trust the leader. Since the leader relies on the rhetoric of the 'people', if his/her people are not homogenous then the methods he uses to gain legitimacy will fail. For example, if Sarah Palin defines to her 'people' as "middle America" but no such homogenous group exists in the United States, she cannot succeed. 'The people' must relate to each other and the leader.

I also use the term underserved, because 'the people' must feel betrayed by the current establishment.²⁶ Without this sentiment, 'the people' would not feel the need to go beyond political norms and elect the populist leader. Again, this group must be homogenous because of the way the leader addresses this people. For example, when Morales claims he represents the true indigenous will, not only does he wish to demonstrate that he (an indigenous leader) should politically represent his people, but he also wants to demonstrate that the current establishment does not address indigenous people's needs. Not only is the current establishment not a part of the homogenous 'people' but also it only addresses its own elite needs. Therefore, in that sense, the 'people' feel underserved. For example, the poor majority in Venezuela feels betrayed by the wealthy oil elite that uses oil revenues to perpetuate its own wealth instead of providing services for the poor. Or the Bolivian establishment neglects its indigenous population, not recognizing their country's cultural diversity.

My theory of populism avoids confining the definition to any specific ideals, locations or economic climates. What populist governments share in common does not stem from these restrictions, but rather from the way the relationship between government/political elite/institutions and 'the people'. If this relationship is imbalanced in favor of the government,

²⁶ Though 'betrayal' is a difficult sentiment to measure, indications of such feelings can be identified. For example, before Chávez came to power, the Venezuelan people expressed their sense of betrayal via rioting, such as the Caracazo.

this creates a climate in which populism can emerge. Though a populist government will not necessarily emerge, these conditions allow a leader to facilitate his/her populist movement. As long as the leader can manipulate a large homogenous people to follow him/her – using the methods described above – then these conditions will allow him/her to succeed. After wooing his/her people, the leader then solidifies his/her relationship by instituting certain reforms that allow more direct participation of ‘the people’.

With this clearer understanding of populism we now understand how populist regimes form and operate. Looking at some contemporary examples will help clarify what populism looks like in action. I will look at Bolivia’s Evo Morales and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez to demonstrate how they exemplify populism. Then, I will turn to the United States and Sarah Palin, to see if she falls into the populist category and what that means in an American context (versus a Latin American context). Though I focus on modern Latin American governments, my definition above extends to the American agrarian populist movements of the early 20th century, to more traditional Latin American populist governments – like Argentina’s Juan Perón – to modern Western European governments, like Italy’s Berlusconi administration. Though my definition is not limited to a specific time period, or region, I am choosing to look at Bolivia and Venezuela because they represent modern populist moments. I want to compare Sarah Palin to these leaders because she also might represent a modern populist figure and it is useful to compare her political moves to those of other modern leaders. By looking at these two leaders juxtaposed with Palin, we can see if Palin has any chance to succeed as a modern American populist leader.

III. THE POPULIST LEADER

After delineating a theoretical understanding of populism, analyzing contemporary examples demonstrates how the theoretical understanding correlates with the way populism operates in the real world. While populist governments consist of more than their leaders, I choose to focus on how the populist leader functions because populism essentially relies on the leader: without a leader to catalyze the movement it could not exist. The leader defines his/her people then uses his rhetoric and a platform that will appeal to his/her people to get elected, thus creating his movement. Though each populist leader uses a different message, each leader employs similar tactics to gain the trust and votes of his/her people. This section will outline the steps populist leaders take to ensure their success. After presenting a general understanding of the way these leaders gain power, I will show how both Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez fit into this framework. Having followed similar trajectories both Morales and Chávez gained the favor of their people to become president of their countries. While showing the ways in which their political/populist moves led them to the presidency, I will also analyze Sarah Palin's current political position. Unlike Morales and Chávez, Palin is not yet president. Yet, not only have 'draft Palin for president' web sites already formed, but also in a February 7th interview Palin admitted she "would be willing" to challenge current U.S. president Barack Obama for the 2012 US Presidency.²⁷ By closely analyzing Palin's moves thus far, alongside her populist contemporaries, I can not only show how she does and does not fit within the populist framework but also predict if she will have the same successes as other modern populists.

²⁷ Judson Berger, "Palin 'Would Be Willing' to Take On Obama in 2012" *Fox News*, February 7, 2010.

Populist leaders are charismatic political outsiders who successfully challenge the status quo (institutions, parties, economic policies) claiming to represent to true will of 'the people'. Being a political outsider helps justify the populist leader's position as one of 'the people'. 'The people' believes the current government unsatisfactorily meets their needs and the populist leader has arrived to represent these unattended citizens. To do this they appeal to a disenfranchised 'people', pitting 'the people's will' against the institutionalized political elite, creating an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Specifically, they use rhetoric claiming that they represent the true will of 'the people', unlike the current elitist leaders and institutions. After using this type of populist rhetoric, to fulfill their promise to 'the people', populist leaders give 'power' back to 'the people' not only via their representation, but also by instituting reforms that incorporate 'the people'. For example, Chávez used referenda when trying to change the Venezuelan constitution, giving the people a voice. Populist leaders claim that since they come from 'the people' and represent the interests of 'the people', acting as 'the people's' representative gives political power back to 'the people'. Additionally, once elected populists institute referenda, initiatives and recall giving more direct autonomy to 'the people'. For example, under Evo Morales, Bolivians approved a new constitution via referendum that grants more power and legitimacy to the indigenous majority.²⁸ Similarly, Hugo Chávez has used the referendum to change certain parts of the Venezuelan constitution, including the elimination of presidential term limits in a 2009 vote.

Before granting more agency to 'the people' via reforms, the leader has to convince 'the people' to elect him/her. One way the leaders win over their constituency is to distance

²⁸ John L. Hammond, "Indigenous Community Justice in the Bolivian Constitution of 2009," (Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 11-14, 2009.)

themselves from the current government demonstrating that they essentially have nothing to do with the status quo. Since ‘the people’ is not satisfied with the existing state of affairs, this positioning helps the populist’s image. As a political outsider, populist leaders not only separate themselves from the “corrupt” establishment, but also claim to be of ‘the people’ – unlike the elitist rulers. For example, Evo Morales embodied this type of anti-establishment leader on many levels. From 1985 to 1997 the three major competing parties in Bolivian elections included: Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), Acción Democrática Nacionalista (ADN) and Movimiento Nacional de Izquierda (MIR). In 1997 the ADN collapsed (with the death of its founder), leaving a fragmented party system. This led to an alliance between the MNR, MIR and what remained of the ADN, against burgeoning anti-systemic parties including Morales’s indigenous based coca workers party: Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS).²⁹ Therefore, as MAS’s leader, Morales embodies an anti-establishment figure; however, Morales’s position as a political outsider extends beyond his party affiliation. In 2002 due to involvement in violent demonstrations against the government’s coca eradication policy, the Bolivian Congress voted for his expulsion further emphasizing his disassociation with government bureaucracy. Finally his Aymara roots and poor upbringing give Morales more legitimacy with his constituents and outsider status as an anti-elitist. Populist leaders use these elements to appeal to their constituents claiming that they do not operate within the corrupt political establishment and represent the true interests of ‘the people’.

Looking to Venezuela, Chávez also used similar strategies to present himself as a political outsider. Before assuming the presidency representing his party the MVR in 1998, the Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente

²⁹ Donna Lee Van Cott, “From Inclusion to Exclusion: Bolivian Elections,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* (2003).

(COPEI) dominated the Venezuelan political scene. In 1958 the two parties established a type of loyalty with one another when they signed the “Punto Fijo” pact, an agreement in which the two parties agreed to share partisan power and patronage, and therefore the two parties controlled Venezuelan politics. Over the years Venezuelan politicians instituted policies that made the Venezuelan economy dependent on petroleum revenues.³⁰ However, once petroleum prices fell, the economy began to suffer causing a socio-cultural shift of people from rural to urban areas looking for work. This created a large dissatisfied mass that could act as the perfect targets of Chávez’s anti-establishment populist platform. Yet even before Chávez’s presidency, in 1989 the Venezuelan people elected Carlos Andrés Pérez (AD) as president. Pérez instituted neo-liberal reforms that privatized state companies and eliminated gas subsidies, which had long maintained domestic petroleum prices far beneath their international levels (and beneath the production costs of gasoline). Upon the elimination of the subsidy oil prices rose by as much 100%, and subsequently, the costs of public transportation rose by 30%.³¹ Since Pérez’s reforms failed to improve Venezuela’s economy, poverty and economic depression continued and with that the frustration of the poor only increased. This frustration culminated with the violent “caracazo” riots that occurred as a reaction to a sharp increase in transportation costs.

After these riots the Venezuelan government lost the stability it had for the last 30 years. In 1992 Hugo Chávez entered the political scene and the eyes of ‘the people’ after attempting a failed coup on the Pérez administration. With this move Chávez presented himself as both charismatic and also a political outsider. Representing the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR-200) – the predecessor of the MVR – Chávez showed Venezuelans

³⁰ Bernard Mommer, “Venezuelan Oil Politics at the Crossroads,” *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, Monthly Commentary*, (2001).

³¹ José Honorio Martínez, “Causas e interpretaciones del Caracazo,” *HAOL*, 2008.

he came from a different political ideology/establishment than the current administration. The coup event caused Chávez's imprisonment, therefore putting Chávez in a national spotlight that created a lasting impression of Chávez's figure on the Venezuelan people's mind. From this point on the Venezuelan people viewed Chávez as a figure that stood up to government corruption, unlike the established parties.

In 1998 the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) party ran Chávez as their candidate. Beyond relying on his credibility that he had gained from his coup attempt 6 years earlier, he used his campaign platform to further present himself as a political outsider. First and foremost he ran under a divergent party: the MVR. But he went beyond his party affiliation presenting himself not only as a political outsider, but also as anti-elite. As one of Chávez's first campaign promises he vowed to begin his presidency abolishing Venezuela's old "Punto Fijo" political system. This promise not only further distanced Chávez from the establishment, but also demonstrated his anti-elite sentiments. With this reform Chávez emphasized his anti-corruption. Venezuelans distrusted the two established parties. By abolishing the system upon which they functioned, Chávez signaled his loyalty not to bureaucracy, but to his people. He also ran on an anti-poverty campaign. A country with a substantial amount of oil wealth, Venezuela has a sharp distinction between the poor masses and the very few very wealthy ruling class. The poor majority distrusted the elite class blaming them for their failure to serve the needs of 'the people'. Chávez promised to institute social welfare reforms. Again, Chávez presents himself as a political outsider because he is both not of the elite and also aligned with 'the people'.

Like her contemporaries, Morales and Chávez, does Sarah Palin qualify as a political outsider? If so, does her position align her closer to 'the people'? Certainly her resignation as Alaskan governor signals a move away from the political establishment. In fact, her resignation

speech alludes to this shift claiming she is “not wired to operate under the same old ‘politics as usual’” and that she chose “the right path... even though it is unconventional and not so comfortable.”³² For Palin, the “same old politics as usual” indicate “what’s wrong - many just accept that lame duck status, hit the road, draw the paycheck, and ‘milk it’.”³³ In other words, Palin expresses her frustration with the American political establishment distancing herself from this bureaucracy. Though stepping down often signifies a leave of absence from politics, Palin admits that her “choice is to take a stand and effect change,”³⁴ signaling that she will not remove herself from politics, but rather operate outside the current (and in her opinion bureaucratic) institutions. Simply maintaining an image as a political outsider, however, does not qualify Palin as a populist. Populist’s use their positioning to portray themselves as politicians more aligned with ‘the people’. In Morales’s case he clearly represents the underserved indigenous population and uses his status as a MAS leader to appeal to this constituency. By distancing herself, has Palin aligned herself closer to a distinct ‘people’? *The New Yorker* claims “she represents the erasure of any distinction between the governing and the governed” appealing to “whites who are feeling under siege by changing economic and cultural conditions.”³⁵ Arguably, her current bus tour brings her closer to this constituency (she is scheduled to tour small Midwestern towns and a few small cities on the East Coast)³⁶; however, the ‘people’ Palin appeals to is not easily defined (or as electorally significant) as Morales’s followers.

³² Sarah Palin, "Sarah Palin Announces No Second Term" (Speech), Office of Alaska Governor: Sean Parnell, <http://gov.state.ak.us/exec-column.php> (accessed April 6, 2010).

³³ Palin, “Sarah Palin Announces No Second Term” *Office of Alaska Governor*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Tanenhaus, “North Star,” *The New Yorker*.

³⁶ “Sarah Palin Book Tour Schedule,” *The Huffington Post*, November 11, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/09/sarah-palin-book-tour-ful_n_351333.html.

As Palin aligns herself with the emergent Tea Party Movement, she continues to present herself as a political outsider. Like other populist leaders she is positioning herself within politics but not via the traditional parties (in the American case: the Democrats or the Republicans). In an interview with Fox News Palin discusses why she feels the need to move away from the traditional system toward this new party

Because both major parties, the "D" and the "R"s have both kind of lost their way in some respects... when the GOP strays from the planks in the platform, a people's movement like the Tea Party movement is invited in to kind of hold these politicians accountable again and remind them of their constitutional limits there on the federal level and it's a beautiful movement.³⁷

Here Palin, like Morales, Chávez and other populist leaders demonstrates her general distrust of the current 'corrupt' political system, which in her opinion needs to be changed. Characteristic of populist movements, Palin presents the solution to this political failure via a call to 'the people'.³⁸ In her keynote speech at the February 2010 Tea Party convention Palin proclaimed, "The soul of this movement [the Tea Party Movement] is 'the people'—everyday Americans who grow our food and run our small businesses, and teach our kids, and fight our wars. They're folks in small towns and cities across this great nation who saw what was happening."³⁹ Here Palin presents a populist notion of 'the people' by defining them as "everyday Americans who grow our food and run our small businesses, and teach our kids, and fight our wars." The difference between Palin's conception of 'the people' and the other leaders I have looked at (Morales, Chávez, Chávez) is that hers is not as clearly delineated. Via Morales we understand 'the people' as the indigenous and for Chávez 'the poor', but Palin just depicts the 'average

³⁷ Sarah Palin, interview by Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*, Fox News, February 7, 2010.

³⁸ This style of rhetoric is not necessarily limited to populist leaders; however, all populist leaders employ this type of rhetoric as a tactic, demonstrating their political positioning. When paired with their other populist characteristics, this rhetoric only adds to their populist personas.

³⁹ Sarah Palin, "Tea Party Speech" (keynote address, Tea Party Convention, Nashville, 7 February, 2010).

American' as 'the people' without much further clarification. The next section will look more carefully at how each of these leaders addresses his/her 'people' and how that fits within both a populist and democratic framework.

IV. ANALYZING POPULISM AS A DEMOCRATIC MODE OF GOVERNANCE

Undeniably, the notion of ‘the people’ is an important aspect of both populism and democracy. Sarah Palin, Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez all use the ideology of ‘the people’ to justify their political and democratic legitimacy. But beyond rhetoric of the people, what is the relationship populism has to democracy? After examining democracy and representation, to answer this question I make the following claims. Populism, as a form of representation, fits into a democratic framework; however, its type of representation differs from that of liberal democracy. Second, though populism presents an alternative to liberal democracy, it does not improve upon it but rather represents a perversion of democracy. Finally, I demonstrate that populism does in fact relate to liberal democracy pointing to Margaret Canovan’s theory, which suggests that populism acts as a shadow of liberal democracy.

Populist rhetoric demonstrates that the leaders believe they act as democratic representatives, representing the true will of ‘the people’. Though Evo Morales said in his election speech “I believe only in the power of ‘the people’, he not only means ‘the people’s’ power to elect him as their representative but also their increased political participation. Once elected the leader demonstrates this belief, creating a more direct process by electing to give them more autonomy via measures like referendum. But even if ‘the people’ are more involved after his election, the populist leader ultimately represents his/her ‘people’. This type of representation does not discount the populist leader’s democratic legitimacy, but further examination reveals that the way populist leaders represent their constituency warps the democratic understanding of ‘representative (liberal) democracy.’ Meny and Surel point out that “democracy was made possible in practical terms through the unexpected combination of

popular sovereignty and the representative principle.”⁴⁰ In democracy a tension exists between popular sovereignty – the will of ‘the people’ – and representation – institutions and elected officials. Liberal democracies rely on institutions and representation more than popular sovereignty. In liberal democracy, popular sovereignty manifests via elections, or public opinion, or theoretically the ability to run for office. Populist regimes, however, depend much more on popular sovereignty, not only having ‘the people’ elect their leader but also instituting reforms that facilitate more direct forms of democratic participation, like referendums. Reforms that incorporate ‘the people’s’ participatory power represents a more direct model because the people do not go through institutions to indicate their preferences. Therefore, theoretically, little difference between popular sovereignty and representation exists in populist regimes because the leader comes from ‘the people’, allowing them to act for themselves. In fact, populist leaders speak as if the ‘representative principle’ does not matter and believe democracy means the power of ‘the people’ and *only* the power of ‘the people’. Given this one-sided approach to democracy populism removes some aspect of representation, leaving popular sovereignty to dominate.

Ultimately ‘the people’ elect the populist leader as their representative, meaning these leaders maintain some level of representation. Representation is an important aspect of democracy because it maintains the incorporation of individuals (the voters) but it also delegates power to more qualified individuals than the ‘common people’. Thinking of the populist leader as ‘the people’s’ representative suggests populism fits with this democratic understanding of populism. However, upon further analysis, the way the populist leader represents his/her people is distinct from our liberal democratic notion of representation. Using Benjamin Arditì’s understanding of different types of representation, populism falls under a category that does not

⁴⁰ Meny and Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, 7.

correlate with democratic ideology. Arditì defines representation three ways: rendering present, acting for others, or acting in the interest of the represented in a manner responsive to them.

Populism presents a very ambiguous type of representation. Populist leaders maintain that they speak in the name of ‘the people’, use their language and give a voice to those who have no voice.⁴¹ Though populist leaders claim to do this, there are two issues with this mode of representation vis-à-vis liberal democracy. First, liberal democracy’s kind of representation tries to represent all people, whereas the populist understanding of ‘the people’ does not represent the entire electorate, but rather a specific, alienating group of people. Ultimately liberal democracy relies on the majority, but unlike populist modes of representation all citizens as voters are included in the ideology of ‘the people’: no one is excluded by virtue of race, class, etc. On the other hand, populism excludes the voices of those parts of the electorate that are not part of the ‘genuine people’. For example, when Evo Morales states that he believes in the power of ‘the people’ he does not mean the entire Bolivian electorate, but rather a specific subset of the Bolivian population: the indigenous.

In addition to whom these leaders represent, there is also a problem with the way populist leaders ‘represent’ these people. Representation means there is a gap between the actual people and their representatives – this is the difference between presenting oneself and having representation. In populism, “a similar ambiguity surrounds the gap between the absent present of ‘the people’ and the action of representing them. The gap is bridged by a ‘presentation’ that forgets the iterability at work in the ‘re-‘ of representation.”⁴² Populist leaders do not exhibit a form of representation because they remove the gap between ‘the people’ and the leader – so

⁴¹ Benjamin Arditì, “Populism as an Internal Periphery,” *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, 81.

⁴² Arditì, “Populism as an Internal Periphery,” 82.

there is no absence, but a joint presence without any representation. Additionally, the leader acts as the vehicle for the expression of the popular will. Rather than taking public opinion into account and then acting as a more educated political actor, the populist leader claims he expresses ‘the people’s’ will, which once again dissolves this gap between represented and representatives. Populist leaders act as incarnations of ‘the people’, rather than their representative. As the embodiment of ‘the people’, the leader has a different function than a representative, and therefore populism exemplifies an artificial type of representation.

Although these populist societies maintain some semblance of representation, further examination reveals that they represent a perversion of democracy. Since populists rely on their rhetoric to define and essentially win over ‘the people’ they “can be considered an ideological corruption of democracy if we consider that democracy, founded upon transmissible principles, implies, in Proudhon’s words, the willingness to teach and educate ‘the people’ rather than to seduce it.”⁴³ This argument suggests that the way in which populist leaders approach ‘the people’ corrupts this democratic principle of personal enlightenment and does not present a true manifestation of ‘popular will’. Therefore, populist governments foster an artificial type of popular sovereignty. The leader “seduces” ‘the people’, convincing them they govern themselves (through the leader), when really this rhetoric does not maximize participation but rather persuades ‘the people’ to vote for a leader that makes the decisions.

Contesting this point, Benjamin Arditi believes the populist style of persuasion does not differ from that of most elected leaders. These leaders rely on simple rhetoric to reduce the complexity of the issues presented to the electorate in order to appeal to ‘the people’ and ultimately get elected. Arditi argues that this “seems to be characteristic of contemporary politics

⁴³ Pierre-André Taguieff, “Le populisme et la science politique. Du mirage conceptuel aux vrais problèmes”, *Vingtième Siècle* 56 (October-November 1997): 4.

generally”, meaning that it does not necessarily demonstrate how populism fails to truly represent ‘the people’ since many elected leaders use these rhetorical tactics.⁴⁴ While democratic leaders use rhetoric that simplifies issues, populists – unlike other democratically elected leaders – use very specific rhetoric of ‘the people’ to gain legitimacy and power. As discussed earlier, they legitimize their rule by defining their people and then claiming to represent the true will of ‘the people’. While other democratic leaders simplify issues and use means of persuasion, populist leaders rely on this understanding of popular sovereignty for validation. In a sense, all elected leaders need to present their issues in a way that all people can understand, but not all leaders use the specific populist rhetoric of ‘the people’ to get elected. This differentiates populist leaders and other democratic leaders demonstrating that populist rhetoric corrupts the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty.

Comparing populism’s specific type of representation to that of liberal democracy demonstrates that populism presents a distinct form of representation that is not more democratic than liberal democracy, and in fact is a worse type of representation. In liberal democracies the electorate chooses its leaders who then make decisions on behalf of their constituency. Though leaders hopefully represent the interests of the general will, this model has certain inherent elitist qualities. First, those who have enough social and economic capital to become representatives, and actually make decisions, come from elite backgrounds. Second, those choosing the leaders have varying levels of access and education, making it easier for the elite to participate and make educated choices. Finally, the elite runs the government and its institutions. This elite run government often fails to recognize the needs of its more marginalized constituents, and often becomes self-serving, only addressing those who have more economic and political capital.

⁴⁴ Arditi, “Populism as an Internal Periphery,” 79.

Democratic leaders base their decisions on perceived public opinion, which is often defined by those with more money to lobby or more political capital to involve themselves in the process. This elitism contradicts the democratic principle that leaders should make decisions that reflect the general will – not the will of those with most agency and access. The populist type of representation, which claims to represent the true will of the people and also facilitates more participation of all people (not just the elite), attempts to present a more accessible government for all. Theoretically populism advocates for a more inclusive type of democracy, but my analysis has shown that this type of representation only feigns greater inclusion. This façade therefore makes populism a worse type of democratic representation.

Margaret Canovan expands upon this notion of populism as a counter to liberal democracy's elitism. Outlining two styles of democracy – redemptive and pragmatic – she claims that populism arises in the gap between the two, acting as democracy's shadow. In other words, Canovan believes populism demonstrates the tension of democracy's simultaneous celebration and skepticism of 'the people'. She concludes that when the gap "between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed."⁴⁵ For Canovan the tension of democracy produces a gap, and when the gap widens populism arises as a response to an asymmetry from the excess of pragmatism and a deficit of redemption. In other words, the government relies too heavily on institutions and not enough on the participation/public opinion of 'the people'. As the institutions and the representatives – or in other words – the elite become too bureaucratic and self-serving, populist leaders have an opportunity to rally 'the people'. They use the current situation to identify the problem with

⁴⁵ Margaret Canovan, "Trust 'the people'! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* (1999): 12.

representation and institutions. Using the ideal of popular sovereignty – or referencing the redemptive side of democracy – the populist leaders demonstrate that the current administration does not incorporate the voice of ‘the people’.

Canovan’s theory suggests populism acts as a corrective method or at least a reaction to elitist democratic institutions and modes of representation. While Canovan’s terminology of ‘the shadow’ suggests this reaction is negative, Benjamin Arditì expands this theory calling populism a specter of democracy.⁴⁶ Criticizing Canovan’s terminology, Arditì thinks a specter can have both positive and negative implications, whereas shadow implies something that necessarily haunts democracy. For Arditì, populism manifests in three ways, each mode compatible with his terminology. First it manifests as a means of representation reconcilable with the liberal-democratic understanding of representation. Second, it represents a mode of participation – a more direct democracy that relies on the direct participation of ‘the people’. Finally, it can have a haunting aspect – like Canovan’s shadow – in which leaders use the rhetoric of ‘the people’ and resort to authoritarianism. For example, Hitler’s appeal to and manipulation of the Aryan people justified his resort to authoritarianism; therefore putting him in this last category. Incompatible with democracy in any way, this facet of populism demonstrates how this seemingly democratic appeal to ‘the people’ can degrade into very undemocratic practices.

According to Canovan and Arditì populism is an inherent part of democracy, acting as a shadow or a specter. I disagree with Arditì’s more optimistic notion that populism can manifest as both a positive or negative specter. Agreeing with Canovan’s shadow, my claim is that populism always represents a warped version of democracy, “the very ‘ideology’ of democracy, its normative content that contemplates ‘the power of the people’ and suggests that political

⁴⁶ Benjamin Arditì, “Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan,” *Political Studies* (2004), 7.

power must be exercised ‘for the people’ may lead, under some circumstances and through a distorted manipulated implementation, to populist recipes, claims, outcomes.”⁴⁷ As a shadow, populist movements do address the shortcomings of liberal democracy: the elitism, the exclusionary aspects, the marginalization and its inability to include or represent all segments of society. Unfortunately, the way populism corrects for this elitism provides a less genuine type of representation, making this corrective method worse than liberal democracy’s elitism. Though populists use the rhetoric of democracy such as ‘the will of ‘the people’ and ‘representation’ this does not necessarily mean populist movements represent a pure or better form of democracy, in fact, the ways in which populists define ‘the people’ presents an exclusionary mode of governance incompatible with certain liberal democratic ideals. Since populist movements homogenize ‘the people’, they exclude people from the process from the very beginning. Liberal democracies refer to ‘the people’ as electorate, giving all people fair chance to participate. Populist regimes demonstrate that really, these democracies do not always address all ‘the people’; however, by correcting for this deficiency they do not present a more democratic system. Instead, they only focus on the needs of the previously excluded group, thus alienating the rest of the population.

⁴⁷ Gianfranco Pasquino, “Populism and Democracy,” in *Twenty-First Century Populism*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28.

V. POPULIST CONCEPTIONS OF 'THE PEOPLE'

Populist leaders not only follow a similar trajectory to power, but to do this they all use similar rhetoric that invokes 'the people'. Analyzing this rhetoric lends insight into the way they entice their electorate and ultimately gain power. Populist leaders, like many democratic leaders, rely on the notion of acting as a true representation of 'the people'. However, what makes their rhetoric unique is though they claim to believe in the power of all people they have specific defined criteria for who qualifies as 'the people', thus alienating those who do not fall within these criteria. Looking at the way Morales and Chávez conceive of 'the people' demonstrates how these two leaders often reference their respective peoples and then go on to qualify them. Specifically Morales portrays himself as the true representative of Bolivia's indigenous, while Chávez believes he acts on behalf of the poor. Like Morales and Chávez, Palin also relies on this notion; however, unlike Chávez and Morales her constituency is ill defined. Though she does reference her people as 'Middle Americans', this concept does not resonate or have as much clarity in the United States as other populist conceptions. In addition to this lack of clarity, the way the American electorate identifies and operates differs from that of Bolivia or Venezuela, making Palin's populist rhetoric even less effective. I hypothesize that Palin's rhetoric will not lead to her success because of the way the American (or liberal democratic) notion of 'the people' operates. Unfortunately, Palin is trying to enforce her populist people within a liberal democratic society. Populism has a distinct notion of the people that differs from a liberal democratic understanding. This section will define both the liberal democratic and populist definitions of the people, demonstrating how they operate under different terms and thus demonstrating why Palin's populist politics will never lead to her electoral success.

Before analyzing populist leaders' usage of 'the people', it is useful to first understand common liberal democratic understandings of 'the people'. Though democratic theorists argue about the ideal and actual expressions/definitions of 'the people', I choose to highlight two different conceptions of 'the people' that are prominent in the theorization of liberal democratic societies. The first understanding presents a classic, more optimistic definition of 'the people': 'the people' act as the electorate, realizing their 'common good' by electing representatives who they believe will best represent their wants and needs. Since this definition might suggest that 'the people' have more political power than they really do, I also consider this second conception, a more cynical or elitist model in which the elites (political leaders and representatives) try to win over the votes of 'the people', but eventually decide issues. This understanding gives elites more power than 'the people', yet still conceives of the people as electorate, voting on leaders. Joseph Schumpeter outlines both of these understandings in his famous account of contemporary democracy. Though he favors the elitist conception, he also discusses the more optimistic version: "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making 'the people' itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will."⁴⁸ Liberal democracy incorporates 'the people' allowing individuals to 'realize the common good' via elections. On the other hand, Schumpeter argues for his more cynical variation claiming, "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for 'the people's' vote."⁴⁹ Having little faith in 'the people', Schumpeter defines an elitist notion

⁴⁸ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2008), 250.

⁴⁹ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 269.

of democracy, presenting ‘the people’ as commodities – just votes to be won. Rather than favor one over the other, I take both of these broad models as understandings of ‘the people’ in liberal democracy. Compared to the populist notion of ‘the people’, both the classical and more understandings demonstrate a very distinct notion of ‘the people’.

While liberal democratic societies conceive of the power of ‘the people’ as an electorate – with equal opportunity to participate via voting – analyzing the populist leader demonstrates the differences between the power of the liberal democratic and populist people. In a speech celebrating his election, Evo Morales proclaimed, “I believe only in the power of ‘the people’... I have seen the importance of the power of a whole people, of a whole nation.”⁵⁰ In a later speech he makes a similar claim suggesting “the will of ‘the people’ was imposed this September and October, and has begun to overcome the empire's cannons.”⁵¹ With statements like these Morales voices his belief, or at least what he hopes his followers will believe, that he represents the will of ‘the people’. When Morales references ‘the people’ he wants to generate the idea that he acts as an accurate representation of the general will – or, in the interest of ‘the people’ as a whole, which is not inconsistent with liberal democracy’s Classical Doctrine. However, he not only uses rhetoric such as ‘the will of ‘the people’ was imposed’ or that he believes in ‘the power of ‘the people’’, but he also reinforces that he specifically represents his people’s general will by portraying himself as one of ‘the people’. In liberal democracies, the representatives are elected because they can act as an accurate representative. Populism suggests that for a leader to most accurately represent his people he must come from the same cultural or socioeconomic background as his constituents. One way the populist leader convinces his people that he is one

⁵⁰ Evo Morales, "I Believe Only in the Power of the People" (Address, In Defense of Humanity Conference, December 24, 2005), The Counter Punch, <http://www.counterpunch.org/morales12302005.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

⁵¹ Evo Morales, (In Defense of Humanity Conference, 24 December)

of them is by using informal terms like the Spanish word for buddy or friend, “compañeros”, to give the impression that he is on the same level as ‘the people’.⁵² As discussed earlier, attempts like these that make the populist leader appear as a political outsider more closely aligns Morales with his constituency.

In addition to using the informal language of his people, Morales further affiliates himself with his ‘people’ by defining the Bolivian people as the indigenous population and only the indigenous population. This tactic differentiates the populist understanding of the people from liberal democracy because ‘the people’ no longer references the entire electorate. For example when Morales refers to a “whole nation” he does not mean all Bolivian voters, he means the indigenous, the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized.⁵³ By defining this ‘whole nation’ as the indigenous people Morales further legitimizes his position because he can include himself as a part of ‘the people’. In a speech given to the United Nations, Morales describes Bolivia’s situation saying, “during the republic, we [indigenous people] were discriminated, marginalized. They never took into account this struggle of ‘the people’s.’”⁵⁴ Morales, a descendent of the indigenous Aymara can include himself as he references the struggles of Bolivia’s indigenous. By using ‘we’ Morales emphasizes his cultural self-inclusion as one of ‘the people’ (specifically the indigenous people). This not only legitimizes his rule, but also makes his type of representation different than other elected rulers. Most elected rulers justify their role as ‘the people’s’ representative because ‘the people’ elected them as officials; however, Morales – though elected – further legitimates his role as their representative by saying he can truly represents ‘the people’ because he is a part of ‘the people’. He justifies his claim to represent the

⁵² Morales, *ibid.*

⁵³ Morales, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Evo Moráles, "A Millennium of People and Not of Empire" (Address, United Nations), Green Left, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2006/685/8138> (accessed April 6, 2010).

voice of ‘the people’ because his voice belongs to that aggregate and therefore – he believes – more accurately understands and represents their wants and needs.

Looking at the way the term indigenous operates in Bolivian society elucidates the power of Morales’s rhetoric. The United Nations Group that formulated the Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous People defines indigenous as:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of societies . . . ⁵⁵

This definition includes both direct descendents and those who choose to identify as indigenous.

Though a subjective definition most Bolivian’s associate with a clearly marked ethnic identity.

Within these guidelines, a majority (62%) of Bolivia’s population identifies as indigenous.⁵⁶

Morales’s ‘people’ – the indigenous population – do represent a large part of the electorate; however, he appeals only to the indigenous population as ‘the people’ thus alienating other (electoral minorities) segments of the population. This definition allows Morales to succeed as a political figure, but does not include the entire electorate. His definition of ‘the people’ alienates and dichotomizes: he represents the indigenous (specifically the coca workers), not the ‘whole nation’. This is inconsistent with both Morales’s language and also liberal democratic ideals that attempt to include all individuals.

Like Morales, populist leader Hugo Chávez also uses the rhetoric of ‘the people’. During a televised interview on the program “Jose Vicente Hoy”, Chávez uses many of the same rhetorical devices as Morales. During one moment he declares:

⁵⁵ José Martínez Cobo, “Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations,” *United Nations* 2008, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/spdaip.html>

⁵⁶ Hammond, “Indigenous Community,” 3.

The political power that we will assume within 48 hours as the new government, the moral power that we have been building, the intellectual power of a project for the future of the country, all of this we will use, and not Hugo Chávez because its not about one man exercising power. This power is dispersed among thousands and thousands of Venezuelan citizens. All of us together have to use this power to build a new political system.⁵⁷

Like Morales, Chávez uses the inclusive terms, like “we”. Again, this legitimates his presidency by claiming he is of ‘the people’. Second, he invokes the power of ‘the people’. Chávez claims ‘the people’ are the ones who hold the power when he says, “this power is dispersed among thousands and thousands of Venezuelan citizens. All of us together have to use this power.” Like Morales, Chávez presents a form of representation that blurs the line between ‘the people’ and its representative, emphasizing the power of ‘the people’. For Chávez ‘the people’ are the important actors.

In an interview with Aleida Guevara (the daughter of South American revolutionary Che Guevara) Chávez outlines his definition of ‘the people’: “The concept of ‘the people’ should always be a concrete reality, not an abstraction. For a people to exist there should be a common consciousness among the inhabitants of a common territory, sharing a common history.”⁵⁸ For Chávez, people must share a commonality. This differs from a notion of ‘the people’ as the electorate. Presumably the only thing the electorate shares is the power to vote for representatives; whereas Chávez believes ‘the people’ share more than that: they share a history. Chávez more clearly defines what history he believes the Venezuelan people share when asked about his origins “I learned what happened to the indigenous people.... I saw what had really happened... they slaughtered us.”⁵⁹ Like Morales, Chávez aligns himself with an indigenous

⁵⁷ Hugo Chávez, interview by José Vicente Rangel, José Vicente Hoy, March 4, 2007.

⁵⁸ Aleida Guevara, *Chávez, Venezuela and the New Latin America: An Interview with Hugo Chávez* (New York: Ocean Press, 2005), 15.

⁵⁹ Chávez, “Venezuela”, 15.

people. Given that on his father's side he has both African and indigenous blood, he can claim to be part of this sect "for me being indigenous means being part of the deepest and most authentic roots of our people"⁶⁰ Yet, even more than relating to the "most authentic roots of our people" he appeals to the poor.

Chávez's discourse... conveyed the notion that the Venezuelan government was concerned with the well-being of the lower classes above that of any other sector. Not only did he state that poor people needed his help and attention more than other sectors, but he sometimes viewed class relations as a zero-sum game. Technocratic symbols and slogans, which appealed mostly to the middle classes, were absent in Chávez's discourse.⁶¹

Having come from a poor family he viewed himself as one of 'the people', often describing himself as a 'fish in water'.⁶²

This populist understanding of the people differs from the people as electorate both in the classical sense and in the more cynical sense. The American understanding of 'the people' as electorate seeking representation does not dichotomize society in the way that Morales's understanding does. Morales focuses on a relatively homogenous group (indigenous), whereas the United States electorate is very heterogeneous. Morales's 'people' has a sense of solidarity because they represent a community that has a shared attribute: indigenous heritage. On the other hand the American electorate feels solidarity not because of a shared identity (like being indigenous), but rather due to the shared understanding that they elect their leaders. Therefore, the American and Populist understandings of 'the people' differ due to the ways in which each group finds solidarity.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁶¹ Steve Ellner, "The Contrasting Variants of the Populists of Hugo Chávez and Alberto Fujimori," *The Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 (2003): 146.

⁶² Ellner, "Variants of Populists," 140.

Compared to the populist understanding of ‘the people’, ‘the people’ as electorate assumes one similarity between individuals: that each voter helps realize the common good via choosing representatives. On the other hand, populist leaders attempt to connect their people via a shared culture, or a shared cause. For example, the indigenous movement in Bolivia relies on a shared ethnic identity. Perón’s descamisados (workers) shared the same economic plight. This does not align with the definition above because instead of a group amassing their individual desires to create a ‘common will’ and hopefully realize the ‘common good’, populist peoples are assumed to have the same ‘common will’ – the same wants and needs. Therefore the electoral process does not aid in the realization of the common good because the leader presupposes the common good by narrowly defining a homogenized people.

Ideally democracy reaches the ideals stated above; however, Schumpeter provides what he believes is a more realistic assessment of modern democracy. This provides a much less idealistic and more elitist understand of ‘the people’. Here Schumpeter mentions ‘the people’ only as votes to be won by elites. This understanding melds better with the populist understanding, but still has some inconsistencies. Like my understanding of populism, Schumpeter emphasizes the importance of the leader – those individuals that acquire power. Schumpeter stresses the role of the leader because he believes modern democracy has evolved into an elitist mode of governance. Elites, not ‘the people’, have the power and compete over ‘the people’, like commodities. Though populism also focuses on the role of the leader to organize the masses, unlike Schumpeter’s definition the leader does not struggle for the votes like commodities. Rather, he aims his platform at those whose vote he has already won.

Though Schumpeter and populism stress different aspects of the leader’s role, both point out the inherent elitism within modern democracy. The traditional definition delineates the

incorporation of all people to express the common will and hopefully reach the common good. Ideally democracy would include ‘the people’, in practice it mostly excludes them from the process. Examining the way modern democracy operates, Schumpeter notes that the public does not actually control the government, but merely elects its leaders, who hold all or most of the power. Though this implies that ‘the people’ have agency, really the leaders have most of the control, presenting their political platform competing to win votes. Populism also addresses this inherent elitism in liberal democracy. Populist leaders emerge in democracies because the leaders (or elites) fail to address the “common people”. Though Schumpeter’s preferred definition seems content with this outcome, populist leaders base their platform on changing this situation. Populism attempts to correct the elitism, appealing to ‘the people’s’ lack of incorporation.

Given that Sarah Palin operates within a liberal democratic society that values the power of the electorate – rather than any given cultural group – her rhetoric does not generate the same success as her populist contemporaries. During her tour across American Palin made comments praising small towns as “the real America” and “pro-America areas of this great nation”. Attempting to separate herself from the elitist Washington politicians – as populists do – in a speech Palin said, “We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard working very patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation.”⁶³ When Palin invokes the “real America” she defines her populist people; however, within a society that does not conceive of ‘the people’ within terms of culture or community she faces more backlash.

⁶³ Lyndsey Layton, “Palin Apologizes for 'Real America' Comments” *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2008.

In fact, she publicly apologized for comments like these.⁶⁴ Since Palin plays the political game in a society that values diversity her one-dimensional populist conception of ‘the people’ will not lead to her electoral success. Since a majority of the American people do not relate to each other based on Palin’s definition of the ‘real America’ she will never have the electoral success of her populist contemporaries.

⁶⁴ Layton, “Palin Apologizes,” *The Washington Post*.

VI. CONCLUSION

Looking at contemporary populist regimes both in theory and in practice I have demonstrated how populism emerges and operates. Focusing on Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales I have outlined the key features of populism as a movement that emerges under certain political conditions. Both of these leaders operate within democratic societies in which the people elect the leader; however, this paper has shown that the populist type of democracy differs from that of liberal democracy. In fact, populism can emerge as a reaction to liberal democracies shortcomings, specifically the inherent elitism present within its institutions and processes. Unfortunately, populism's reaction to this unjust reality creates a worse type of democracy. While it includes the people that the government had previously failed to address, it provides a false sense of agency and also alienates the rest of the electorate.

Populism may not correct liberal democracy's flaws; but at least it draws attention to its imperfections. While liberal democracy promotes equality and the incorporation of all people into politics, its current manifestations fail to reach this ideal. American liberal democracy allows the American electorate to choose its representatives; however, beyond this ability, the government still operates on an elitist agenda, failing to serve those with the least agency and capital, the most marginalized. Elites – institutions, representatives, lobbies and interest groups – dictate much of the American political scene. Understanding that American liberal democracy is far from reaching this ideal of total equality and incorporation demonstrates the appeal of a

figure like Sarah Palin. Like any populist leader, she has found a niche of American people that she feels American politics neglects. Using the same populist rhetoric and tactics as her Latin American contemporaries, she hopes to win over the American people. Like the Bolivian and Venezuelan situations, Palin believes that the government no longer addresses the needs of all American people, but only those of the elites and intellectuals (on the coasts). She has used her celebrity from the 2009 presidential election to spread this message. After quitting her job, publishing her book, going on a book tour and now beginning her TV career as a Fox News contributor (with her new show *Real American Stories*) and TLC reality show star, she has secured her place as an American public figure. And these efforts have paid off. Two million viewers tuned into the premier of *Real American Stories* and her Facebook fan page has over 1.5 million fans⁶⁵ and media can't get enough of Palin's politics and antics.

Like any populist leader, Palin has used her visibility to align herself with 'the people'. However, gaining celebrity does not translate into political success. Though Palin has found her niche, she alienates too many segments of the American electorate to ever win enough votes. These same tactics work in Bolivia and Venezuela because a large segment of the electorate relates to one another on cultural levels. Therefore, when Morales and Chávez narrowly define their constituencies, they only alienate a minority and can guarantee electoral success by uniting a majority of underserved people. In the United States, 'the people' do not relate along cultural levels, but rather as the electorate. Even though the American government may not address the needs of Palin's 'people', and perhaps she can better represent this segment than the current government, referring to 'the people' like her populist contemporaries will not lead to her political success. These populist tactics and rhetoric Palin alienate too many other Americans

⁶⁵ David Carr, "How Sarah Palin Became a Brand" *New York Times*, April 5, 2010, New York edition.

that comprise 'the people'. While Sarah Palin may be a household name, Palin's populism cannot flourish in American society.

Though Palin's populism won't eradicate America's elitist institutions, it does highlight liberal democracy's failure to incorporate *all* people. While having elites or experts run a government does not necessarily present any danger to democracy's ideals, once these institutions no longer govern on behalf of themselves and not the 'the people', then the government begins to lose its democratic legitimacy and something needs to change.

Unfortunately, populism does not present the solution to this issue, but rather a reactionary response that ultimately provides a worse type of democracy. If anything, populism has merits because it demonstrates the failures of a government and does give voice to those who previously had none. Perhaps liberal democracies and other inherently elite governments can learn from populist movements and try to find a different, better solution.

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