Populism and the Erosion of Horizontal Accountability in Latin America

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Abstract
This article explores which factors enable or hinder populist presidents in Latin America to pursue a radical strategy of institutional change and induce the erosion of horizontal checks and balances. Applying an actor-centred approach, the article focuses focusing on specific constellations in the political arena that shape populist presidents’ incentives and their ability to engage in institutional change. Three conditions are considered to be most decisive: the absence of unified government between the executive and the legislature, the existence of a ‘power vacuum’ in the political arena and the distribution of public support. Using configurational analyses, different causal paths explaining the presence or absence of the erosion of horizontal accountability are identified.

Keywords
populism, Latin America, horizontal accountability, liberal democracy

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Comparative research on the consequences of populism in public office only recently arose (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013: 1042; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012b; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016). This was long overdue since the ambiguity of the relationship between populism and democracy has been one of the most recurring and debated aspects in the normative literature on populism across its entire history (see Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Until recently, this relationship has mainly been investigated through in-depth case studies and small-N research (e.g. Hawkins, 2010; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013), resulting in a tentative consensus that populism may serve as a corrective to democracy through addressing the underprivileged and incorporating citizens who were not (or did not feel) represented by established elites and at the same time threaten institutions of liberal democracy (de la Torre, 2000; Mudde and...
Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012b). Prominent examples in Latin America that follow this pattern are Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. But are populists in power always as consequential to democracy as these prominent cases imply? Looking at other populist presidents in Latin America, we can also find examples where the threat to democracy did not materialise, for example, Alan García in Peru or Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil.

Recently, comparative researchers have begun to test this relationship in large-N studies as well, especially in the Latin American context (see Houle and Kenny, 2016; Huber and Schimpf, 2016). While these studies are a step forward in unpacking the ambiguous relationship between populism and democracy in highlighting how populist governments differ from non-populist governments, they focus on the average effect of populism and hence are not able to explain why some (very prominent) populists erode democratic institutions and others do not. None of these recent studies systematically analyse under which conditions populists in power pose a threat to democracy and which conditions might hinder them to do so. To answer this question, however, is impervious, since only if we know when and how populists engage in eroding liberal democratic institutions, can we begin to design strategies to countervail their impact (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016).

Hence, to learn more about populism as regimes in power, the aim of this article is to compare and explain the different behaviour of populist presidents towards institutions of liberal democracy in Latin America over time. The study focuses on Latin America since populism has a long history in this region and many cases figure prominently in the scholarly literature on the phenomenon (e.g. Conniff, 1999; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012b). The research question centres on the conduct of populist presidents towards democratic institutions of horizontal accountability, defined here as the capacity of different branches of government to mutually check each other against power abuse (Diamond et al., 1999: 3).

To answer this question, I take an actor-centred approach focusing on specific constellations in the political arena that shape populist presidents’ incentives and their ability to engage in institutional change. Therefore, I compiled a genuine data set covering all populist presidents elected under democratic rule in the Latin American region from 1979 until 2014. Merging both qualitative information and expert judgements, I identified 16 populist presidents during this time frame. The hypotheses developed in this article will be tested by means of a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) which is specifically suited for research designs with a low or medium number of cases (Ragin, 1987). Consequently, this article employs an analytical strategy that takes a middle ground between small-N and large-N studies.

**Populism and (Liberal) Democracy**

The phenomenon of populism poses many challenges to comparative researchers. Especially in the Latin American context it has been defined along the lines of feature lists or narrow core characteristics which led to many versions of populism with adjectives (Weyland, 2001). Instead of using such a narrow definition, a minimalist ideational conceptualisation that focuses on the underlying set of ideas common to all these approaches will be deployed here (Aslanidis, 2016; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, in press). Therefore, populism is defined as ‘a Manichean discourse that identifies the Good with a unified will of the people and the Evil with a conspiring elite’ (Hawkins, 2009:
This definition has several advantages over traditional definitions. First, it is better equipped for the comparative analysis of populism across time and space – for example, it permits the comparison of populism in Latin America with populism in Europe (see Hawkins, 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012b; van Kessel, 2015) or the comparison of historical examples with contemporary populism (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, in press). Second, it does not preclude the specification of subtypes of populism by adding attributes to the core definition. Beyond the recurrence to an anti-elite rhetoric and the statement to be the true party or person to represent ‘the good people’ in terms of their general will that unites all populists (Aslanidis, 2016; Rooduijn, 2014), other elements help to distinguish different forms of populism – such as left- or right-wing populism, neo-populism or indigenous populism (e.g. Madrid, 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

The relationship between populism and democracy has been studied intensively. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012b) have recently advanced the debate about the ambivalence between these two concepts and proposed an analytical framework to study the consequences of populism. Building on Robert Dahl’s (1971) definition of democracy, they theorise potential positive and negative effects of populism alongside the dimensions of public contestation and political participation. In line with other studies, they argue that the corrective to democracy becomes manifest through the emergence and rise of populists, while the threat to democracy usually relates to them being in power (see Canovan, 1999; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Hence, the emergence of populism can be seen as a symptom of the lack of responsiveness of traditional political elites. In such contexts, populists offer dissatisfied citizens an option to hold incumbent elites (vertically) accountable. The threat to democracy, in contrast, is closely related to the presence of populism in power. While a populist strategy may be perfectly suited to gain public office playing by the rules of the game, once in power the same populists may turn against core representative institutions to maintain power over time. To grasp these differences, de la Torre (2000: 10) distinguishes between ‘populism as regimes in power … [and] populism as wider social and political movements seeking power’. This article follows the first analytical perspective by focusing on the potential threat populism in power poses to democracy.

But what constitutes the threat of populism in power to democracy? I argue that the ideational approach helps us to answer this question and that populist ideas are the motivating force behind the illiberal behaviour of populist leaders (see Rooduijn, 2014; Ruth and Hawkins, 2017). The antagonistic nature and the moralistic style of the populist discourse are often directed against liberal democracy, which is based on political pluralism and the constitutional protection of minorities. Through the anchorage of populism in the imaginary concept of ‘the good people’, populism excludes those parts of society that do not fit into the (however defined) picture (de la Torre, 2000; Rooduijn, 2014). Populist ideas are, hence, rooted in the representation of the people as a homogeneous group and negate the diversity of society inherent in the liberal principle of democracy (Plattner, 2010). This inherent tension between populism and liberalism is the reason why populists are perceived as a threat to democracy itself.

More specifically, I argue that in presidential systems, like those in Latin America, populist ideas especially clash with one core principle of liberal constitutionalism, namely, horizontal accountability. Horizontal accountability (hereafter HA) is defined as follows:
the capacity of state institutions to check abuses by other public agencies and branches of government. Its ‘locus classicus’ is the interbranch relations among the judiciary, executive and legislature. These separated powers are supposed to constrain, check, and monitor one another (Diamond et al., 1999: 3).

Although several state agencies may be empowered to control government actions (e.g. oversight agencies), executive-legislative checks and balances are at the core of the effective separation of powers (O’Donnell, 1999). Hence, the main focus here lies on executive-legislative relations.

In addition to the tensions between populist ideas and HA, the transition from opposition to government evokes immense pressure on populists, since they face ‘problems of credibility’ as soon as they gain government responsibility (Schedler, 1996: 302) and risk to be perceived as unreliable if they behave like their opponents did. Consequently, presidents elected via a populist mandate face strong incentives to turn against established liberal democratic institutions, like horizontal checks and balances, especially if these institutions might hinder them to pursue their political agenda. In the next section, I will elaborate on the incentives of populists in power to engage in a radical strategy of institutional change and which factors enable or constrain them to do so.

**Political Opportunity Structure of Populist Presidents**

Especially in the context of Latin American presidential systems, the populist threat should be taken seriously, as the presidential self-coup by Fujimori in Peru and the democratic regression under Chávez in Venezuela show. Although the threshold of success to gain public office in presidential systems is high, they provide favourable conditions for populist challengers, due to the high degree of personalisation and centralisation through the nationwide, direct election of the executive (Linz, 1994). Hence, presidential systems in Latin America provide most likely conditions for populist presidents to come to power.

I argue here that the rise of populism to power opens a unique window of opportunity for institutional change, but that the success of populist presidents to increase the power of the executive to their advantage depends on the potential power of other political actors to defend the status quo. Changing institutions within the context of representative democracies is a delicate task and usually involves several political actors (Corrales, 2016; Negretto, 2009). More importantly, institutions of HA touch upon the power balance between political actors and their influence in the political decision-making process and therefore entail high stakes (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Thus, it can be expected that the erosion of horizontal checks and balances will most likely be resisted by some political actors negatively affected by a potential change (Pérez-Liñan and Rodríguez-Raga, 2009).

In this article, I focus on the first stage of institutional depletion, that is, change of horizontal checks and balances in favour of the executive. The focus on the first stage of institutional change in this analysis is important to isolate the influence of domestic and foreign political actors involved in these processes. Rovira Kaltwasser and Paul Taggart (2016) recently argued that the timing and degree of institutional change determines the involvement of foreign actors if populists erode (liberal) democratic institutions, and that ‘strong reactions from abroad might occur only after domestic forces have not been able to tame populists’ (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016: 211). Consequently, I argue
that domestic political contexts in which populist presidents are embedded condition both their *incentive* to engage in and their *capability* to actually change established institutions of executive-legislative checks and balances in their favour. But which factors enable or hinder populist presidents to pursue a radical strategy of institutional change once they gain power?

**Working Hypotheses**

In this section, I identify three conditions that constitute the political opportunity structure of institutional change and thereby condition either the *incentive* or the *capability* of populist presidents to erode HA. These conditions are as follows: first, the absence of unified government between the executive and the legislature; second, the existence of a ‘power vacuum’ in the political arena; and third, high public support in favour of the president.

*Unified Government.* Although presidential regimes are conducive to the rise of populist challengers to power, institutional provisions of checks and balances in those systems may considerably constrain presidents in realising their political agenda (Shugart and Carey, 1992). Moreover, the cooperation between these two branches of government heavily depends on ‘the separation of purpose’ between them, that is, the support of the president’s party in Congress (Elgie, 2001; Shugart, 1995). Especially in Latin American presidential systems that combine plurality or majority run-off presidential elections with proportional representation formula for the election of legislatures, unified government occurs less frequently (Wills-Otero, 2009).

Hence, if populist presidents assume power without majority support in Congress to push their policy agenda through, their *incentive* to change the institutional balance of power increases considerably (see Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). On the contrary, a situation of majority support in Congress may tame the *incentive* of populist presidents to engage in the difficult and time-consuming process of institutional change since they are already able to implement their policy agenda through established channels of decision-making:

Hypothesis 1: Populist presidents face higher incentives to engage in the erosion of horizontal accountability in the absence of unified government.

*Power Vacuum.* Another condition that has been identified to be conducive to the radical behaviour of populists towards liberal democratic institutions is the existence of a ‘power vacuum’ in the political arena (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013; Mayorga, 2006; Weyland, 2009). In such contexts, traditional elites – and with them the institutions they dominate – are especially vulnerable to attacks. An anti-status quo appeal combined with low rates of trust in established political elites and democratic institutions makes institutional change viable for populist presidents (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). Hence, the decay of established political elites may be exploited by populists to carry out a radical institutional change, either through the adoption of a new constitution or the informal depletion of checks and balances (Weyland, 2009).
Raúl Mayorga (2006) identifies two specific reasons that create such a ‘power vacuum’ in the political arena: the breakdown of traditional party systems and/or a crisis of governability due to executive-legislative deadlocks prior to the rise of a populist. Similarly, Steven Levitsky and James Loxton (2013) analyse several cases of populist and non-populist governments in the Andean region identifying two context conditions to be important for their ability to trigger regime change towards competitive authoritarianism: institutional weakness and party system collapse. Thus, institutionalised party systems and parties with stable societal roots may be a safeguard against radical institutional change. In such circumstances, the existing political elite may exert a ‘moderating pull’ on those forces inclined to induce institutional change (Weyland, 2009: 150) and constrain a populist presidents’ capability to engage in the erosion of HA:

Hypothesis 2: Populist presidents have a higher capability to engage in the erosion of horizontal accountability in the context of a ‘power vacuum’ in the political arena.

Furthermore, several studies highlight that situations of outright conflict between presidents and legislatures often result in the impeachment of the former (e.g. Carey, 2003; Peréz-Liñan, 2007). This ostensible ‘congressional supremacy’ does not, however, always result from the strength of legislatures themselves. While the military has been the ‘moderating power’ in solving executive-legislative conflicts before the 1980s, Kathryn Hochstetler (2006) illustrates that since the third wave of democracy the public resumes the role of a moderator in executive-legislative dissolution processes. This leads us to the third and final condition.

Popular Support. In presidential systems, the executive is constrained not only by the legislature but also by its principal. Electorates are not necessarily a ‘passive but cheering audience’ (O’Donnell, 1994: 60) after the election took place but rather take an active role in presidential falls, executive-legislative conflicts and in demanding societal accountability (see Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, 2000). The possibility that a presidential mandate may be withdrawn through popular protest challenges one central characteristic of presidentialism: the fixed term limits (Hochstetler, 2006).

However, while several authors show that informal vertical accountability mechanisms – like popular mobilisation – may restrain presidential dominance in executive-legislative relationships, strong popular support in favour of the president may foster presidential dominance and even radical behaviour of presidents to restructure liberal democratic institutions (Carey, 2003; Peréz-Liñan, 2007). Thus, the margin of safety of presidents and their ability to pursue a radical strategy of institutional change depends on their skill to sustain high levels of popular support:

Hypothesis 3: Populist presidents have a higher capability to engage in the erosion of horizontal accountability if they dispose of high levels of popular support.

Hence, the behaviour of populist presidents towards HA follows a complex pattern and cannot be explained by a single condition alone. Consequently, I assume an interactive pattern of conjunctural causation with respect to the conditions that make up the incentive structure of populist presidents (unified government) as well as their capability to engage in institutional change (power vacuum and popular support). Neither of these
conditions is expected to be individually necessary and sufficient to bring about the outcome, but their combination should result in a causal path that leads to the erosion of HA.

Research Design

This study constitutes the first comparative evaluation of the conditions that shape populist presidents’ incentives and their capability to interfere with institutions of HA. The empirical analysis covers all populist presidents in Latin America from 1979 until 2014. The relative unit homogeneity of the countries in this region with respect to the system of government as well as their history of both democratisation and economic development is advantageous and allows me to concentrate on a reduced set of explanatory factors that vary among them (Bértola and Ocampo, 2012; Hagopian and Mainwaring, 2005). Nevertheless, I will address some individual-level factors that stand out in some of the cases in the discussion below, for example, leadership and style of governing.

The three hypotheses stated in the previous chapter will be tested by means of a QCA which allows to account for situations of complex and asymmetric causality of both the presence and absence of an outcome (Ragin, 1987, 2006; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Moreover, QCA is especially suited for research designs with low or medium numbers of cases. Due to its appealing simplicity and less controversially debated properties, I apply crisp-set QCA (csQCA) (see Grofman and Schneider, 2009; Krogslund et al., 2015). Based on Boolean algebra, csQCA helps to identify those conditions that bring about a defined outcome. With csQCA, both the conditions as well as the outcome are binary coded, classifying their presence (=1) or absence (=0) for each case.

Case Selection

The definition of populism is a debated topic which makes the selection of cases a matter of debate as well. As the arguments in the former section are based on the concept of a populist mandate, the units of analysis in this study necessarily need to be elected presidents that used a populist discourse in their electoral campaign (see Hawkins, 2010; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). Presidential terms were not considered in the selection process if any of the following four conditions were applicable: (1) if they were interim presidents and (2) if they had not finished at least one term by the end of 2014. Furthermore, (3) since populist presidents face the strongest pressure of success shortly after their first rise to power, re-elections are only considered if the respective candidate was out of office for at least one term. Finally, (4) since I am interested in the effect of populism in power on (liberal) democratic institutions only elections under minimal democratic conditions were considered, excluding cases with a polity2 score below 6 as the cut-off point (Polity IV; Marshall et al., 2016). Based on these criteria, a data set of 98 presidential terms has been compiled covering 18 Latin American democracies from 1979 to 2014.

To identify presidents deploying a populist discourse in their electoral campaign, I proceeded in two steps: First, using the ideational definition of populism as a benchmark, I conducted an intensive literature review covering research notes and articles on presidential elections, party systems and electoral systems. Resulting from this review, 16 presidents with a potential populist mandate were pre-selected. For two additional cases, the literature yielded conflicting accounts as to the populist nature of the presidential campaign (see Table 1), and therefore, these cases were marked as ambiguous. Second, to validate this coding, the data set was sent to several experts in the field to benefit from
their expertise. The experts were asked to comment on the pre-selection of populist presidents based on the definition described above which was provided with the data set as well as comments on the 16 pre-selected and 2 conflicting cases. Overall, expert comments clearly objected three pre-selected cases, indicated three additional potential cases and showed conflicting evaluations of the populist discourse for two pre-selected presidents. Table 1 lists 21 potential cases indicated either by the literature review or by expert comments.

In the remainder of this section, I will explain which criteria were used to exclude cases and why some cases with conflicting accounts remained in the analysis. First, cases were excluded from the analysis due to opposing accounts from at least one expert without conflicting accounts in favour of the coding by another expert. Several experts objected the classification of Alejandro Toledo and Carlos Pérez as populist presidents. At least one expert contradicts the coding of Joaquín Balaguer as a populist president. Since no accounts were made in favour of the coding of these presidents by other experts, they were excluded from the analysis.

Second, the experts indicated four cases as borderline – Néstor Kirchner, Carlos Menem, Hipólito Mejía and Mireya Moscoso – all of which were included in the analysis based on a thorough re-assessment. For example, expert judgments on Carlos Menem in Argentina range from ‘borderline case’ and ‘moderately populist in the campaign’ to ‘populist’. Reassessing accounts in the literature on Menem’s discourse, we can find

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>First term</th>
<th>Pre-selection</th>
<th>Expert statements</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARG</td>
<td>Carlos Menem</td>
<td>1989–1995</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARG</td>
<td>Néstor Kirchner</td>
<td>2003–2007</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOL</td>
<td>Evo Morales</td>
<td>2006–2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRA</td>
<td>Fernando Collor de Mello</td>
<td>1990–1992</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COL</td>
<td>Álvaro Uribe</td>
<td>2002–2006</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOM</td>
<td>Joaquín Balaguer</td>
<td>1986–1990</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOM</td>
<td>Hipólito Mejía</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Jaime Roldós</td>
<td>1979–1981</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Abdala Bucaram</td>
<td>1996–1997</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Lucio Gutiérrez</td>
<td>2003–2005</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Rafael Correa</td>
<td>2007–2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HON</td>
<td>Manuel Zelaya</td>
<td>2006–2009</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIC</td>
<td>Daniel Ortega</td>
<td>2007–2012</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>Mireya Moscoso</td>
<td>1999–2004</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PER</td>
<td>Alan García I, 1985</td>
<td>1985–1990</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PER</td>
<td>Alberto Fujimori</td>
<td>1990–1995</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PER</td>
<td>Alejandro Toledo</td>
<td>2001–2006</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>PER</td>
<td>Alan García II, 2006</td>
<td>2006–2011</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEN</td>
<td>Carlos Pérez</td>
<td>1989–1993</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEN</td>
<td>Rafael Caldera</td>
<td>1994–1999</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEN</td>
<td>Hugo Chávez</td>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cases were excluded from the final selection if opposing accounts of at least one expert exists without accounts in favour of the coding by another expert. Cases with conflicting and borderline accounts were included or excluded based on a re-assessment of the literature (see discussion below).

Table 1. Detailed Information on Case Selection.
evidence from both qualitative case study research (Armony, 2005) and the analysis of his presidential campaign speeches in 1989 (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, in press) that further back the coding of him as a president with a populist mandate.

Third, concerning Álvaro Uribe in Colombia, a case which was not included in the pre-selection due to opposing accounts in the literature (Dugas, 2003), expert comments yield conflicting evaluations with respect to his coding as non-populist (one in favour and one against). I follow the reasoning of John Dugas (2003) in this respect as he shows that although Uribe broke with the (traditional) Liberal Party prior to his election, he did not base his presidential campaign on an anti-elite appeal. Thus, Uribe will be considered as a president without a populist mandate. Another conflicting case with respect to the expert coding was Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, with two experts identifying him as using a populist discourse and one expert arguing against his selection as a president with a populist mandate due to his embrace of the Catholic Church hierarchy and his role in the political establishment. Despite his apparent insider status, consulting recent speech data by Kirk Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (in press) backs my coding of Ortega as a president deploying a populist discourse. He will hence be included in the following analysis.

Finally, two additional cases were indicated as potential populists by experts: Manuel Zelaya (Honduras) and Alan García’s second term. With respect to the former, accounts in the literature indicate that before and during his presidential campaign, ‘Zelaya appeared to be a typical Honduran career politician’ (Ruhl, 2010: 98). It was in his second presidential year when he took a turn to the left aligning with Hugo Chávez and initiating a phase of inter-branch conflict that finally led to a military coup in June 2009 (Ruhl, 2010). Thus, Zelaya will not be coded as a president with a populist mandate in this study. Due to accounts in the literature with respect to the moderate appeal of García during the presidential election in 2006, his second term as Peru’s president was not included in the pre-selection (Schmidt, 2007). However, his discourse might have been perceived as non-populist due to the strong populist discourse of his direct competitor Ollanta Humala in the 2006 race. New data from Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (in press) indicates that García’s discourse clearly qualifies as populist during his second campaign. Using both literature review and expert ratings, 16 cases were finally selected for the analysis.

Calibration

The outcome variable of change in constraints on presidential power will be captured by the item of ‘Executive Constraints’ from the Polity IV data set (Marshall et al., 2016). This item is measured on a 7-point scale with higher values indicating higher degrees of constraints on executive power. To build a dummy variable, the yearly ratings of ‘Executive Constraints’ during the first term of the populist president were inspected; if these ratings decrease, the outcome takes on the value 1; and if ratings increase or stay the same, the outcome takes on the value 0. Furthermore, a closer look on the data indicates that before the rise of a populist president to power, all cases fall either into the highest category of the scale, described as ‘parity or subordination’ (7), or into the second highest category (6) that takes an intermediate position between ‘parity or subordination’ (7) and ‘substantial limitations’ (5) (Marshall et al., 2016: 24–25).

Three conditions are expected to jointly contribute to a decrease in executive constraints: the absence of unified government, the presence of a power vacuum and ongoing popular support in favour of the president.
The construction of a binary condition indicating a situation of unified government is based on the distribution of seats in Congress. To identify if a situation of unified government, I follow the classifications by Matthew Shugart (1995) and Robert Elgie (2001) who posit that a unified government exists if the president is supported by more than 50% of deputies in parliament (in both chambers of a bicameral legislature). Legislators may pertain to either the president’s own party or a stable coalition of parties. If this is the case, the condition takes on the value 1. Value 0, hence, covers both no-majority governments (where no party or stable coalition holds a majority in the legislative branch) and divided governments (where the opposition holds a majority in the legislative branch) (see Shugart, 1995: 327).

The binary coding of the condition indicating the existence of a power vacuum is based on the analysis of qualitative case studies and electoral data. The condition takes on the value 1 in the case of a party system breakdown – with electoral support for traditional parties dropping below 45% before or during the rise of the populist president – or a severe crisis of governability – with the resignation or impeachment of a president occurring directly before the election of a president.

To capture a president’s popular support, I use presidential approval ratings from public opinion surveys provided by Ryan Carlin et al. (2016). I use data covering the first 3 years in office to evaluate the level and trend of the president’s popularity.10 In case the change in the outcome took place within the first 3 years in office, I only use approval data prior to the event to assure the expected direction of causation. The condition is coded 1 if a president’s average approval ratings figure above 50% and show no clear declining trend.11

Results and Interpretation

Based on the binary coding of the cases, the Boolean algebra constructs a truth table covering all possible configurations of the three conditions. With three conditions, eight configurations are logically possible. The 16 cases in this study cover six configurations, leaving two logical remainders. In line with a conservative approach, the outcome of these logical remainders is coded absent to exclude them from the analysis (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Furthermore, the QCA yields no contradictory cases with respect to the empirically observed configurations and the outcome (Table 2).12

Explaining the Presence of the Outcome

There is one sufficient path leading to the presence of the outcome: the absence of unified government (g) AND the presence of a power vacuum in the political arena (V) AND the presence of strong popular support for the populist president (S). Note that upper-case letters refer to the presence of a condition or the outcome (C) and lower-case letters indicate the absence of a condition or the outcome.

\[ g V S \rightarrow C \]

The five cases that are covered by this causal solution are Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Alberto Fujimori, Carlos Menem and Evo Morales. All five populist presidents that pursued the erosion of HA did craft new constitutions. In the case of
Menem, however, the reduction in executive constraints was due to his excessive use of executive decree authority at the beginning of his first term (Carey and Shugart, 1998). Unlike the other positive cases, Menem already had the institutional power to use executive decrees to push his political agenda through Congress. Since these decrees could only be rejected through the normal legislative process – including a presidential veto – there were few possibilities for the opposition to check the president (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997). However, when it came to Menem’s ambition to reform the constitution as to enable him to stand for a second term, he needed to negotiate with the opposition. In exchange for the inclusion of immediate re-election, the opposition even managed to incorporate some additional checks on presidential power into the new constitution (Negretto, 1999).

Contrary to the limiting effect of the Argentinean Constitution in 1994 on executive power, constitutional reforms in the other four cases clearly benefited the executive. A plethora of changes with respect to constitutional presidential powers were introduced in these new constitutions: the Bolivarian Constitution of 2009 includes the immediate re-election of the president as well as lowered congressional hurdles for presidential appointees (Madrid, 2011). The Constitution of Ecuador from 2009 introduced the immediate re-election of the president, expanded the regulation of government-initiated referendums (Breuer, 2009) and the power to dissolve the legislature and call for new elections (Conaghan, 2011). The Peruvian Constitution from 1993 introduced the immediate re-election of the president, established the abolition of bicameralism and expanded executive decree authority (García Belaunde, 2006). The Constitution of Venezuela from 1999 introduced the immediate re-election of the president, established the abolition of bicameralism, introduced the possibility of government-initiated referendums and expanded executive decree authority (López Maya, 2011).

Moreover, as highlighted in the unified government condition, the separation of purpose between the executive and legislative branch may work as a check on (institutionally) powerful presidents (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997). Consequently, all of these presidents faced incentives to engage in the institutional engineering of electoral systems to increase the partisan powers of the executive. More specifically, in four of the five cases, electoral procedures decreased the separation of purpose between the two branches through increasing majoritarian elements: in Bolivia’s mixed-member
system, the number of multi-member districts was reduced to include special indigenous single-member districts (mainly benefiting the core constituency of Evo Morales, see Alpert et al., 2010); in Ecuador, a change from proportional representation to a mixed-member system with a high share of single-member districts took place (Bowen, 2010); in Peru, the separation of purpose was minimised by the abolition of bicameralism and the reduction in the size of the Congress (Crabtree, 1993); in Venezuela, bicameralism was abolished as well, furthermore, the share of single-member seats in the mixed-member system was increased by 10 percentage points at the expense of both multi-member districts and compensatory seats for minority parties (Molina and Pérez, 2004).

As stressed by the ‘power vacuum’ hypothesis, populist presidents may rise to power in times where a process of democratic deconsolidation might already have begun (e.g. Weyland, 2009). In such situations, populists may capitalise on a weak momentum of representative democracy. This finding acknowledges the argument made by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012a) that the threat of populism is most severe in unconsolidated democracies, where institutions of democratic representation are weakly entrenched in society. Furthermore, the joint negative effect on executive constraints of a power vacuum in the political arena and ongoing public support for the president in the absence of a unified government confirm the thesis of Levitsky and Loxton (2013) that populist presidents are invested with a populist mandate to disempower those – usually representative – institutions controlled by the existing and putative distrusted political elite.

In sum, the analysis showed that the erosion of executive constraints in the case of Menem was due to the informal practice of executive decree authority, while in the other cases, constitutional engineering led to an increase in both constitutional and partisan powers of the executive branch. This leads to the conclusion that in situations of non-unified government, populist presidents face strong incentives to either formally or informally change the institutional balance of power in their favour. However, in each case, presidents were only capable to prevail in these processes over opposing forces if traditional elites were considerably weakened and if they were able to uphold high levels of approval in the public.

**Explaining the Absence of the Outcome**

The analysis of the absence of the outcome identifies a solution with two sufficient paths: the absence of a power vacuum in the political arena (v) OR the absence of unified government (g) AND the absence of strong public support for the president (s).

\[v + gs \rightarrow c\]

To evaluate the relative importance of these causal paths, we can refer to their coverage scores (Ragin, 2006; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Two types of coverage measures are available: raw coverage, which denotes the percentage of the cases covered by the causal path in relation to all cases with the same outcome, and unique coverage, which refers to the percentage of the cases that are uniquely covered by the respective causal path. The first causal path – v – has a raw coverage of 82% and a unique coverage of 46%, while the second causal path – gs – has a raw coverage of 55% and a unique coverage of 18%. Both paths are completely consistent, that is, no contradictory cases arise.
The first causal path covers 9 of the 11 cases. Among these nine cases, five are covered only uniquely by this path: Kirchner in Argentina, García in Peru in his first term, Mejía in the Dominican Republic, Ortega in Nicaragua and Roldós in Ecuador.

Among these cases, Kirchner can be characterised as a very powerful president with both strong constitutional and partisan powers, who also disposed of ongoing presidential approval ratings around 75% (Carlín et al., 2016; Levitsky and Murillo, 2008). Moreover, although Argentine democracy underwent a tumultuous economic and political crisis, a few years before, Kirchner rose to power; the changes in the party system due to this crisis were not severe enough to create a power vacuum. Most importantly, these changes did not affect the president’s party – the Justicialist Party (PJ) – which, on the contrary, gained a structural advantage vis-à-vis other parties in the system through its control of the Senate and a fragmented opposition in the Chamber of Deputies after 2001. Hence, de facto the PJ developed into a dominant party in the Argentine party system (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008: 22–23). This also explains why the populist discourse of Kirchner was mainly directed against the economic elite and not against established parties or the democratic system as such (Fernández Alonso, 2010). Hence, the political opportunity structure explains why Kirchner did not need to change the rules of the democratic game and take an authoritarian turn, although he might have had the means to do it.

The second case in this set, García (Peru), managed to win the presidential elections in 1985 as the candidate of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) – a traditional populistic party machine (Graham, 1990). In his (first) term, he assumed office in times of no power vacuum and with a comfortable parliamentary majority of his party in Congress. His presidential approval ratings, which were initially very high, crumbled only towards the end of his term. Hence, especially in the beginning of his presidency, García did not face strong incentives to engage in institutional change, since he was able to implement profound policy changes right from the start, which were initially supported by both leftist and conservative sectors of society (Graham, 1990; Werlich, 1988). In the second half of his term, however, the support of both his own party and the public imploded when his government policies began to fail. Ultimately, García left office at the height of a severe economic and political crisis setting the stage for his populist successor Alberto Fujimori (Graham, 1990; Levitsky and Cameron, 2003).

Mejía in the Dominican Republic rose to power in the context of a stable party system and with a comfortable majority of a traditional party – the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) – in both chambers of the Congress. He also managed to uphold popular support until after the mid-term elections in 2002 (Sagás, 2003). While he did not face incentives to change the electoral system, as it already invested his party with control over Congress, he had an interest in reforming the constitution as to enable his immediate re-election (Corrales, 2016). After reforming the constitution, however, his popularity decreased immensely prior to the election in 2004 which he ultimately lost against his predecessor Leonel Fernández from the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD) (Sagás, 2005).

Another interesting case in this set is Ortega in Nicaragua. Although his own political party – the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) – fell short of a majority in Congress and his constitutional powers vis-à-vis the legislature were weak, he can be considered a very powerful president due to his ability to forge political pacts with the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), another traditional party in the Nicaraguan party system (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997). A series of pacts between Ortega and the leader of the PLC, Arnoldo Alemán, provided him with the necessary majority support to
push his political agenda through Congress (Colburn and Arturo Cruz, 2012). In line with other cases in this set, Ortega might have been able to formally change executive-legislative relations in his favour, yet the unrestricted control over his own party and the long-standing alliance with the PLC decreased his incentives to do so (Marti i Puig, 2010). Moreover, although his presidential approval ratings were fairly low throughout his first term, the citizenry did not pose a large constraint on him. On the contrary, he even managed to get re-elected for a second formally unconstitutional presidential term in 2011,\textsuperscript{14} in a seemingly intransparent and fraudulent election (McConnell, 2014).

Finally, Roldós in Ecuador is a special case in this set. He rose to power in Ecuador after the democratic transition in 1979 as the candidate of the Concentración de Fuerzas Populares (CFP), the party of Assad Bucaram who was banned himself to run as candidate. Once elected, Roldos did face strong opposition not only from political challengers in Congress but also within his own party. The situation might have resulted in open executive-legislative conflict if not a sudden plane accident ended his life in 1981 (Martz, 1983).

To sum up, with the exception of Roldos, the four cases uniquely identified by this causal path all came to power as candidates of traditional parties within their party systems. Relatedly, their electoral success also contributed to the absence of a power vacuum in the political arena as well as provided them with absolute majority support in Congress. The political opportunity structure, hence, decreased the incentives of these populist presidents to engage in the erosion of HA.

Turning to the second causal path, the joint positive influence of non-unified government and low public support on executive constraints covers six cases: Bucaram, Caldera, Collor de Mello, García’s second term, Gutiérrez and Moscoso. This part of the solution confirms arguments made in the literature on the importance of the public as a moderating force in times of executive-legislative deadlock (Hochstetler, 2006; Pérez-Liñan, 2007). All cases where the legislative prevailed in executive-legislative conflicts are covered by this path. Bucaram has been declared mentally incapable by Congress after only 7 months in office and in a situation of extensive public protest against him (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2010), Collor de Mello was impeached by Congress with broad support of the public following the discovery of corruption charges against him (Panizza, 2000) and Gutiérrez – who most excessively tried to alter institutions of HA in his favour – had been impeached by Congress in an emergency session and against the background of a strong anti-government mood in the public (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2010: 102–103). Each of these populists maintained a confrontational political style towards the opposition dominated congress but without the possibility to resort to plebiscitarian tactics due to the lack of public support, and all of them lost the support of the public because they did not meet the expectations raised in their presidential campaigns (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). Thus, informal vertical accountability mechanisms – like popular mobilisation – may help to restrain presidential dominance in executive-legislative relationships (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, 2000).

The remaining cases that were not forced out of office were no more successful in changing the executive-legislative balance. Caldera and Moscoso both had to govern with an opposition-controlled Congress and were unable to implement their economic programmes to prevent economic crisis in their countries. Consequently, they failed to deliver the promised social welfare benefits and rapidly lost support in the public (e.g. Davila, 2000). In his second term, García had to govern without majority support in Congress and against the background of increasing social unrest in society, which
culminated in severe intra-party conflicts (Lupu, 2012). However, other than the three presidents that had to leave office early, neither of them maintained a confrontational style towards congress.

To sum up, the cases covered by this causal path confirm the important role of the public in presidential systems, both in situations of outright conflict between the executive and legislative branches as well as their role in safeguarding democratic institutions in general. Moreover, this path also highlights the aforementioned pressure populists experience when they gain government responsibility, especially if they do not command over a working majority in Congress.

**Conclusion**

This article set out to investigate the impact of populist regimes in power on democracy. The study highlights that not all populists in power are as consequential for democracy as prominent examples like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Alberto Fujimori in Peru. Consequently, the aim of this study was to analyse under which conditions populists in power pose a threat to democracy and which conditions might hinder them to do so. To conduct a first comparative analysis, I focused on populist presidents in Latin America, a region that disposes of a long history with populism in power. By means of a csQCA, I show that the distribution of power in the legislative branch, the strength or weakness of the traditional political elites as well as the presence or absence of public support in favour of a populist president are decisive factors that shape both the *incentives* and the *capability* of populists to engage in the erosion of horizontal accountability.

The analysis of the presence of the outcome (i.e. the erosion of HA) identified a complex causal path indicating that successful populists had strong *incentives* to undermine the power of opposing traditional elites if they fell short of a supporting majority in Congress. However, they were only *capable* of doing so if they were able to exploit the bad reputation of traditional elites and at the same time uphold high support levels in favour of their agenda of institutional change. Thus, similar to Andreas Schedler’s argument (1996) that weak legislatures may lead to authoritarianism, we may also conclude that institutionally powerful legislatures that are dominated by a weakened and discredited political elite may enable populists to change the institutional order. Without the support of the public, however, these presidents would not have been able to reshape their democratic systems in the ways they did (Hochstetler, 2006).

Moreover, the analysis also enabled me to investigate factors that might hinder populists to successfully engage in the depletion of liberal democratic institutions. The analysis of the absence of the outcome indicates two sufficient causal paths. The first path (i.e. the absence of a power vacuum) mirrors the importance of party systems with stable social roots as safeguards against radical institutional change. However, the ‘moderating pull’ of traditional parties does not only have to come from opposing forces, on the contrary, if populists come to power as candidates of traditional parties, their own party organisation may keep them from inducing institutional change processes (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013; Weyland, 2009).

The second causal path – the combined effect of non-unified government and low levels of popular support – substantiates Hochstetler’s plea (2006) not to underestimate the power of the public in executive-legislative conflicts. Popular mobilisation is a crucial factor with respect to populist presidents’ success in restructuring liberal democracy. In
cases of conflict between populist presidents and opposition-controlled legislatures, the support of the public turns the balance.

While these results are a first step to uncover different political opportunity structures that may increase or tame the threat of populism to democracy, further research needs to be done. For example, this study only highlights the effect of populism on executive checks and balances, while other institutions of HA, like the role of the judiciary or other independent state agencies, have been excluded. Moreover, the detailed case analyses highlight additional individual-level factors that might be important to include in an expanded analysis, like the cooperative or confrontational style of presidents vis-à-vis opposition-controlled parliaments. Finally, with populist candidates globally on the rise, it is impervious to identify when and how populist engage in illiberal behaviour and how to countervail their intentions to destabilise liberal democracy beyond the Latin American region. The results of this study may travel to other regions in the world, most likely, to other presidential systems, like the United States, or semi-presidential systems, like France.

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Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Table S1: Information on Unified Government Condition
Table S2: Information on Power Vacuum Condition
Table S3: Information of Popular Support Condition
Table S4: Robustness Checks – Different Calibrations and fuzzy-set QCA
Table S5: Robustness Checks – Casewise Exclusion of Borderline Cases

Notes

1. Note that other proponents of the ideational approach refer to populism with other labels, like political appeal or thin-centred ideology (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). For a critical discussion of the different labels used within the ideational approach, see Aslanidis (2016).

2. Institutional change triggered by populists may pass through three stages. In the first stage, a populist may try to debilitate the horizontal axis of accountability (O’Donnell, 1999). In the second stage, radical populist behaviour may be directed against the vertical axis of accountability leading to types of political regimes labelled as competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2002). The third and final stage leads to the abolition of any kind of democratic facade, for example, through a coup d’état. It is in this last stage of institutional change where the role of international actors increases considerably in checking populist actors (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016).

3. See, for example, Stijn van Kessel’s (2015) study on the electoral success of populist parties in contemporary Europe.
4. I provide results from a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) using continuous information for public support in the Online Appendix.

5. Experts have been selected based on their publication record as well as their comparative knowledge of populism in Latin America. The survey has been sent to six experts, of whom three – Kirk Hawkins, Steven Levitsky and Carlos de la Torre – responded with their evaluations of the case selection.

6. I provide results of the QCA excluding these four cases in the Online Appendix (see Table S5).

7. Note that during the terms of 82 non-populist presidents’ executive constraints increased by 1 point on the 7-point scale in seven cases, by 2 points in one case and by 4 points in one case. Only during four terms of non-populist presidents did executive constraints decrease by 1 point (although in two cases the change returned to the initial starting point by the end of the term).

8. Detailed information on the coding of these conditions is provided in Tables S1, S2 and S3 in the Online Appendix.

9. In both chambers if the Congress has a bicameral structure. Data on legislative seats were taken from www.ipu.org/parline/.

10. The intermediate time frame of 3 years was chosen to account for both the honeymoon phase in presidential popularity and electoral dynamics in the final years of presidential terms (Carlin et al., 2012; Mueller, 1970).

11. Since most political science concepts do not appear in binary form in their empirical expressions, the main criticism with respect to QCA circles around the arbitrariness of cut-off points used to calibrate conditions (e.g. Krogslund et al., 2015; Skaanning, 2011). To substantiate the results of the analysis reported below, I conducted several robustness checks with different cut-off points for the coding of party system breakdown and popular support in the Online Appendix. I did not change the cut-off point for the unified government condition since the cut-off point of 50% plus one legislator is theoretically justified through the concept itself. The results of these robustness checks are remarkably robust and lead to the same causal paths (see Table S4).

12. I used the Stata package fuzzy to conduct the analysis (Longest and Vaisey, 2008).


14. Prior to the election, the Supreme Court ruled the re-election ban in the Constitution ‘unconstitutional’ (Colburn and Arturo Cruz, 2012).

References


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