

# Understanding Right-Wing Populism (or the Extreme Right)

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It is significant and welcome that the LASA 2024 program committee has created a special program track on the extreme right in Latin America and beyond for next year’s Congress in Bogotá, Colombia. There is a need for creative new scholarship on the extreme right, which has had and continues to have a major impact on politics in much of the world, including Latin America. It has become “dominant in the present” (Finchelstein 2017, xi) and generated a series of urgent questions, including some about the impact of the extreme right on democracy. It has also stimulated new debates within and across a variety of humanities and social science disciplines. This article defends a particular approach to the study of the extreme right in Latin America, one that puts it in historical and global context and connects it to previous waves of right-wing politics in the region. It briefly describes antecedents to the extreme right and some of its contemporary manifestations, discusses some challenges of doing work in the field, and proposes some questions for future research.

## Lineages of the Extreme Right in Latin America

The precursors of today’s extreme right-wingers in Latin America were nineteenth-century conservatives struggling to deal with the consequences of the French Revolution and political independence. They revered traditional social hierarchies and “order,” which they often took to be God given. Conservatives were sometimes skeptical of science and mistrustful of criticisms of authority. They usually supported slavery, the exclusion of Afro-Latin Americans from citizenship, and the acceptance of the indigenous only on condition of their

assimilation to the norms and practices of the white population. The conservative preference was for a strong and centralized state, a limited franchise, and a dominant landed elite. If sovereignty was ultimately based on the people, it was exercised and embodied by a powerful and sometimes charismatic leader, a substitute for the premodern absolute monarch.

In the mid-twentieth century, classic populists in Latin America also had affinities with the extreme right wing of the current period. The governments of Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955, 1973–1974) in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945, 1951–1954) in Brazil, and José María Velasco Ibarra (1944–1947, 1952–1956) were attempts to present an alternative model to Soviet communism as well as liberalism and socialism (Finkelstein 2017, xv). While the attempts were not fascist, their national developmentalist ideology shared elements with fascism, and their use of the media (particularly radio) was aimed at promoting national integration and state-building.

A third group of antecedents of today’s extreme right is the neoliberal populists of the 1990s. Carlos Menem (1989–1999) in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) in Peru, Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992) in Brazil, and Abdalá Bucaram (1996–1997) in Ecuador cultivated personalistic attachments to followers, concentrated power in the presidency, and engaged in neoliberal reforms (Weyland 1999).

The contemporary extreme right in the region defies simple generalizations and spans a variety of movements, parties, governments, and leaders and distinct sets of contexts and grievances. It includes the governments of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) in Colombia, Jimmy Morales (2016–2020)

in Guatemala, Nayib Bukele (2019–present) in El Salvador, Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) in Brazil, and Rodrigo Chaves (2022–present) in Costa Rica, as well as the presidential candidacies of José Antonio Kast in Chile in 2021 and Rodolfo Hernández in Colombia in 2022.

An example of the power of the extreme right can be seen in contemporary Argentina. In the presidential primaries of August 13, 2023, which took place in the midst of an economic crisis, the first-place candidate with about 30 percent of the vote was Javier Milei of the Freedom Advances (La Libertad Avanza) party. Milei went on to win the presidential election on November 19. It is not clear at this point exactly how he will govern, but his victory in the race is likely to have a major impact on Argentine politics.

Milei is a pugnacious 52-year-old economist and congressman who is an admirer of former president Jair Bolsonaro of neighboring Brazil. He argues that Bolsonaro actually won the 2022 Brazilian presidential election. Milei promises not only to bury Kirchnerismo, associated with the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007); his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015); and her successor, Alberto Fernández (2019–present), but also to get rid of the “useless,” “parasitical” and “corrupt . . . political caste.” Milei offers a combination of radical economic and cultural measures. He claims that he wants to abolish the Central Bank, dollarize the economy, privatize all state enterprises, reduce the primary fiscal deficit (before interest payments) to zero in his first year, introduce vouchers in the education system, liberalize access to firearms, prohibit abortion, and cut the number of ministries from 18 to eight. The latter would include the closure of the Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity as well as the Ministry of the Environment and

Sustainable Development and the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (because “climate change is a socialist lie”).

Milei has called the pope a “communist” and thinks the idea of social justice is “an aberration.” His vice-presidential running mate Victoria Villaruel is a defender of Argentina’s military dictatorship of 1976–1983. Milei’s strong showing in the primaries was celebrated by Jair Bolsonaro and his son, the Brazilian congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, José Antonio Kast (who ran in the 2021 presidential elections in Chile), Santiago Abascal, the leader of Spain’s Vox party, and the leaders of the Brothers of Italy party, currently part of the coalition government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.<sup>1</sup>

What is the appropriate term to describe Milei? The new president himself says he is a “libertarian liberal” and an “anarchist of the market” (Alonso 2023a). There are many other terms that might fit—for example, *demagogue* or *national populist*—or calling him a member of the alt right, extreme right, or new right. However, one of Milei’s intellectual heroes, the late US economist Murray Rothbard (1992, 7), used another term that encapsulates Milei’s political style and ideological position. In an article that anticipates the candidacy of Donald J. Trump, written almost fifteen years before the 2016 presidential election in the United States, Rothbard called for the emergence on the national stage of a “right-wing populist.”<sup>2</sup>

### Right-Wing Populism

A minimalist understanding of right-wing populism classifies it as movements, parties, leaders, and governments who engage in transgressive political performances that oppose “elites” in the name of the “people,” rely at least in part on unmediated communication between

<sup>1</sup> Information on Milei in this and the preceding paragraph comes from Alonso (2023a), Derbyshire (2023), *The Economist* (2023), Goñi (2023a, 2023b), Lissardy (2023), and Smink (2023).

<sup>2</sup> To situate Rothbard in the context of US politics, he idolized Senator Joseph McCarthy, reviled the civil rights movement, and supported the Louisiana politician (and former member of the Ku Klux Klan) David Duke. Rothbard is unusual in embracing the “populist” label. Steve Bannon, President Trump’s former adviser, also uses the term approvingly. Most politicians described as populist vehemently reject the characterization and apply it instead to their opponents. See, e.g., Bolsonaro (2022, 5).

a leader and followers, and spread right-wing ideological messages such as antiglobalism, traditional social values, and ethnic or religious nationalism. This definition accommodates the three main approaches to populism in the literature, which define it in ideological, organizational, and discursive or performative terms. Right-wing populism can thus be distinguished from other forms of populism with different (especially left-wing) host ideologies, and movements, parties, governments, and leaders that do not rely on populist discourses, performances, or styles.<sup>3</sup> Equally important, right-wing populism “usually brings together multi-class alliances that cut across different social sectors,” with “hierarchies of grievances” that vary from country to country (Panizza 2023, xxvii). In addition, it is often hostile to pluralism, preferring to see the authentic and downtrodden “people” as a single entity (Wolf 2022, 179).

Right-wing populism is a type of mass politics that is to the right of traditional conservatism. It frames politics as a moral crusade. It has an aversion to “globalism” and multilateralism and defends national sovereignty, a hard-line approach to law and order, the patriarchal family, conservative social values, and religion. And it has brought leaders to power in Poland, Hungary, the Philippines, India, Turkey, the United States, Brazil, El Salvador, and elsewhere. One of the most interesting things about right-wing populist leaders is how they have innovated in terms of the use of social media, presentational style, and ideological content. Right-wing populists can often generate wild enthusiasm amongst their supporters. In Rothbard’s (1992, 13) words: “Centrist politics, elitist politics, is deliberately boring and torpid. The people get put to sleep. . . . But right-wing populist politics is rousing, exciting, ideological, and that is precisely why the elites don’t like it.” Another important aspect of right-wing populism is its ambivalent relationship to liberal democracy, which it sometimes threatens.

Right-wing populism offers to “take back control” from the forces of transnational technocratic elitism (Lind 2020, xxiii). Instead of multiculturalism, pluralism, and tolerance, it offers religious (and often ethnic) nationalism. In place of multilateral and supranational governance, it suggests traditional national sovereignty. Rather than the separation of powers, constraints on executive power from legislative, judicial, auditing, and investigative bodies, and the protection of minority rights of liberal democracy, it shows a preference for a strong leader who embodies the will of the people and engages in a plebiscitary form of governance. In the face of increasingly assertive social movements demanding rights for the indigenous, immigrants, women, and sexual, gender, regional and religious minorities, right-wing populism offers the God of state-sanctioned religion, the patriarchal family, and the rites and symbols of the mainstream identity of the national majority. Unlike traditional conservatism, it wants not to maintain the stability of the status quo but to radically deconstruct fundamental aspects of the current social order.

In economic policy, US and European versions of right-wing populism appear to differ from their Latin American counterparts. In the first two regions, and especially after the financial crisis of 2008–2009, right-wing populists usually offer economic protectionism and nationalism as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, as well as social safety nets for “the people”—the deserving “real” people of the nation. In Latin America, in contrast, right-wing populists are more likely to offer a hard version of neoliberalism, at least rhetorically. But both variants attempt to offer the prospect of popular sovereignty and a new order that is fairer to those made vulnerable or uncomfortable by the cultural and socioeconomic status quo (see the articles by Sonja Wolf on Bukele and Camila Rocha on Bolsonaro in this issue).

<sup>3</sup> The weight of ideology in defining right-wing populism is subject to debate. Weyland (2019, 329–330), for example, writes: “It is typical of populism that it lacks ideological definition. . . . Populism’s lodestar is opportunism . . . rightwing parties and movements can only turn populist if they dilute their extremist ideology fundamentally and turn it into a loose, vague mentality.”

## Challenges in the study of right-wing populism

There are several challenges to using right-wing populism as a concept in analysis. One is the contested nature of the label “populist.” Some scholars avoid the term because of perceived inconsistency and bias in its use, especially when it is used casually to dismiss anything or anybody that offends establishment interests. However, many terms used in scholarly analysis are contested. The fact that some words are used offhandedly in everyday speech does not mean that they cannot be employed in the service of what Laclau (2018, 249) calls “obstinate rigor.” The rich tradition of writing about populism in Latin America provides a framework that allows us to see the extreme right in historical and global perspective. This can be done in a way that is not dismissive of those who support right-wing populists; rather, the aim is to understand the reasons people support such movements, to take the right-wing populist critique of contemporary liberal democracy seriously (de la Torre 2019, 24), and to engage with scholars who admire right-wing populism (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Goodwin 2023).

Another challenge is to use the comparative method to gain an understanding of what is truly distinctive and what is shared across localities, nations, and regions. As Panizza (2023, xxviii) writes, “There are still significant lacunae in the study of the political makeup of right-wing populism in Latin America that make comparisons between regions difficult, but there are parallels and differences between the rise of right-wing populism” in different regions.

A third task is to complement comparison by uncovering transnational networks in which narratives and tactics are shared. Cowan (2018), for example, has shown how conservative Christian organizations (both Catholic and Protestant) in Brazil such as Tradição, Família e Propriedade (Tradition, Family and Property) worked to build a right-wing network linking the United States and Brazil and opposed to “cultural Marxism,” abortion, homosexuality, “gender ideology,” and other perceived ills of

modern society. This network eventually fed into the support base of the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, a base sometimes referred to as the alliance of beef, Bible, and bullets (Lapper 2021) in reference to agribusiness, conservative (and especially Evangelical Protestant) Christian organizations, and the police and military as well as non-uniformed gun enthusiasts and gun manufacturers.

Uncovering such transnational links is no easy task. The meetings of right-wing populists are not always public, and much of their communication is encrypted. Some of the most innovative research on right-wing populism involves the gathering and analysis of text on public social media sites or private ones to which researchers have gained access.

Publicly available sources are still valuable and can sometimes show where affinities and connections lie. One example comes from the book of the right-wing populist activist and writer Christopher Rufo. Rufo is currently involved in a hostile takeover of the New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college. Rufo and five other trustees, appointed in January 2023 by Florida's governor, are busy remaking New College along the lines of Hillsdale College, a conservative Christian college in Michigan. The new board of trustees fired the previous president and replaced her with a president who is the former Florida state house speaker (paying him \$400,000 per year more than his predecessor), deferred the decisions on tenure of five professors in the spring of 2023, and shut down the gender studies program (Anderson 2023; Petti 2023; Spitalniak 2023).

Rufo's outlandish book *America's Cultural Revolution* tries to stimulate moral panic by alleging that the miniscule revolutionary left of the 1960s somehow managed to take over the entirety of US education, government, and business by means of a stealthy and nihilistic “cultural revolution.” He makes the case for a “counterrevolution” even though his career at the Heritage Foundation, the Discovery Institute, and the Manhattan Institute, and now as a trustee of New College, is a refutation of his own argument.

In his book Rufo expresses admiration for the education policies of Jair Bolsonaro because they were opposed to the ideas of Paulo Freire (Rufo 2023, 330n4). He does this without mentioning the deep cuts to university research (in the natural sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences) under Bolsonaro; the harrowing disorganization, ineptitude, and callousness of the Ministry of Education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; or the allegations of corruption against some of the top officials in the ministry (Bueno 2023; Matos 2022).

More generally, there are strong parallels between the right-wing populist playbook with regard to education in Florida and Brazil. (This mirrors a broader affinity between extreme right-wing politics in Latin America and the United States.<sup>4</sup>) In both places alleged subversion (Marxism and communism in Brazil, “woke” ideology and critical theory in Florida) is used as an excuse to try to restrict freedom of thought and expression, intimidate educators into silence and conformity, and impose a single standard of “correct” education in areas such as history and sociology in an approach that mirrors the defense of religious dogma in pre-Enlightenment Europe. In both places, right-wing populists are aggressively using their power over the educational bureaucracy to impose a political ideology in institutions in which the freedom to question and think independently are supposed to be valued. They are doing exactly what they accuse the left of doing, and they justify their authoritarianism in terms of the highest values of excellence, equality, dignity, and freedom (Rufo 2023, 281). The hypocrisy of right-wing populists in this particular area is troubling, and it poses real problems for democracy. Democracies in which large swathes of the population are constantly vilified as “communist” or “woke” by people in authority are compromised and incomplete. The very real distortions and exaggerations of some

ensorious versions of left-wing thought should not become a reason to create a new form of McCarthyism.<sup>5</sup>

### Questions for further research

There are at least three areas in which more research on right-wing populism is needed. The first is in understanding the drivers of support for right-wing populist movements, parties, leaders, and governments. The second is in analyzing under which circumstances, why, and how right-wing populist governments dismantle elements of liberal democracy. And given the second, the third is which alternatives to right-wing populist politics are most effective.

With regard to the first issue, how material and nonmaterial changes contribute to demands for right-wing populism needs to be more clearly understood. Economic factors and changes in the workplace combine with social and cultural forces, as well as psychological ones, to contribute to the rise of these movements, but the causal mechanisms within and distinctive trajectories of these movements are not always clear. An additional element is the role of digital technology in these movements. Is there an elective affinity between digital media and right-wing populism (Gerbaudo 2018; Zuboff 2019), or are social media platforms tools that can be used well by people of any political persuasion?

The second issue requires empirical work. For example, right-wing populist governments use history to build an identity with supporters, and more insights into this process are needed. The evocation of threats and conspiracy theories such as those supposedly posed by “gender ideology” and “cultural Marxism”; the invocation of a “middle class” ideology of hard work, individual responsibility, and opposition to the expansion of welfare state measure; and attacks on “globalism”

<sup>4</sup> An example of this affinity can be found in the case of Henry “Enrique” Tarrío, a leader of the Proud Boys whose 22-year sentence for his involvement in the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol is the longest to have been given to anyone prosecuted for those events so far. Tarrío is a Cuban American who grew up in Miami. See Wendling (2023).

<sup>5</sup> For a cogent critique of right-wing populist attitudes and tactics in education, see Srinivasan (2023). She writes, “Much of what is under attack . . . is not the abuse of academic freedom, but academic freedom itself.” And she adds, many “right-wing culture warriors . . . subscribe to ‘free speech’ and ‘academic freedom’ only when, and to whichever ideological ends, it suits them.”

can all be elements of right-wing populist government, but so can more tangible policies such as social policies, protection for favored industries, and benefits to religious groups. In addition, does right-wing populism veer toward fascism, as some authors claim (Cox and Skidmore-Hess, 2022; Finkelstein 2017, xvi–xvii), and if so, what are the drivers of that process?<sup>6</sup>

Peruzzotti (2022) argues that democratic hybridization takes place when elected populist governments dismantle major elements of liberal constitutionalism. Alter and Zurn (2020) imply that right-wing populism arises as part of a pattern of backlash politics, a distinct form of contentious politics marked by a retrograde aim of returning to a prior social condition and disruptive and transgressive goals and tactics that challenge the establishment. The analysis of Rocha (2021) in the Brazilian case converges with this approach somewhat, in that she locates the beginning of the rise of Bolsonarism in the second term of President Lula (2006–2010), as a reaction to Lulism (see also Alonso 2023b).<sup>7</sup> Vieira, Glezer, and Barbosa (2022), examining the first two years of the Bolsonaro administration in Brazil, claim that President Bolsonaro used “infrapolitics,” or decrees and administrative regulations, to achieve authoritarian ends, sending him on a collision course with the Federal Supreme Court. And Csaba Gyóry and his colleagues are embarking on a major comparative study of the resilience—or not—of the rule of law in the face of various threats, including the instrumentalization of the law by right-wing populist regimes, a practice that elsewhere and in a different context has been called “authoritarian legality.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, what are alternatives to right-wing populism? Lero (2023, 124) recommends a new paradigm for economic development and a proactive democratic vision. Arato and Cohen (2019, 110) argue for “a new version of the welfare state” that can be fought for on domestic and international levels as a means of reducing the rise of inequality of recent decades. Fukuyama (2019, 166) wants the promotion of “creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy” with the use of “public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers to those identities.” Wolf (2023, 379) argues for the restoration of citizenship so that democracies once again provide opportunity, security, and dignity to large and expanding majorities. There are also fierce debates amongst scholars about whether left-wing identity politics is a barrier to or accelerant of right-wing populism.<sup>9</sup>

Not all right-wing populisms threaten democracy. And there are other threats to democracy aside from right-wing populism. Right-wing populism can serve as an alert that democracy is not working. But at its most pernicious, it is a harbinger of simplistic pseudosolutions, as well as hatred, violence, and authoritarianism. Unless there is a better understanding of the causes of this type of mass politics, its impacts on society and institutions, and its metamorphosis in power, we may be in danger of witnessing continuing de-democratization around the world. That is why the panel discussions and roundtables that emerge from the call for this new special track at the next LASA conference in Bogotá in 2024 give us much to look forward to.

<sup>6</sup> For a good analysis of the differences between fascism and right-wing populism, see De la Torre and Srisa-Nga (2022, 98–113).

<sup>7</sup> Rocha (2021) traces the origins of what she calls the new right in Brazil in liberal think tanks and virtual communities dedicated to discussing the ideas of thinkers such as Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, and Olavo de Carvalho.

<sup>8</sup> See the website of the conference “Rule of Law, Resilience and Erosion: The Interplay between Institutional Design and Everyday Practice” organized by the Institute for Legal Studies at the Centre for Social Sciences, October 12–14, 2022, Budapest at <https://www.reconstitution.eu/en/events/calendar/detail/rule-of-law-resilience-and-erosion.html>. For an application of the concept of authoritarian legality, see Pereira (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Piketty (2020, 961, 965), although he rejects populism as a concept, argues against the “identitarian menace” in its right- and left-wing forms, claiming that class cleavages should take precedence in politics. What he advocates is a focus on the property regime, fiscal, social, and educational systems and the management of borders to reduce economic inequality and strengthen democracy.

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