

Analyzing the Role of Populism in Democratic Backslides: Venezuela's Case Study Based on Max Weber's Theories

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Abstract. Populism is overwhelmingly cited by political researchers as a major factor that leads to democratic backslides in recent years. Venezuela is a prime example of democratic degradation resulting from populist ideologies promoted by President Hugo Chavez. This study focuses on exploring the role of populism in Venezuela's democratic backslide through Max Weber's theories of charismatic leadership, which adds nuance to the discussion of populism. An analysis based on the connection between populism and excessive charisma presents Hugo Chavez's consolidation of power and subsequent democratic breakdown in Venezuela. This paper concludes that populism in Venezuela has led to political polarization and Hugo Chavez's cult of personality, which are made possible by Chavez's appeal to a sense of national crisis. Ultimately, Hugo Chavez's populist agenda deconstructed the Venezuelan democratic system and paved the path for the rise of authoritarianism. The conclusions in this paper regarding the destructive effects of populism on Venezuelan democracy can provide useful insights for political researchers and policymakers in contemporary liberal democracies.

Keywords: Venezuelan Democracy; Populism; Max Weber; Hugo Chavez.

1. Introduction

As of 2022, the world is experiencing a general decline in both the quantity and quality of democracies. Numerous governments have transformed into authoritarian regimes and begun to threaten political rights and civil liberties formerly protected in liberal democracies. Internal to the functioning democratic societies, undemocratic forces are exploiting the shortcomings of the political systems, undermining checks and balances. As a result, according to Freedom House, democracies declined globally for the last 16 consecutive years, and authoritarianism is expanding [1].

One particular set of ideologies that is argued to erode democratic rules recently is populism. It can represent a range of political stances that exist in democracies with the emphasis on representing "the people" against the elite. Populism is observed to be associated with popular leaders, many of whom are described to possess charisma. Famous populist politicians such as Donald Trump have the capability to mobilize the support of millions of voters, which makes them influential figures in democracies. Thus, understanding the effects of populism on democracy is crucial because it is a formidable force that can potentially lead to democratic breakdowns.

Venezuela is one of the most cited examples for analyzing democratic breakdown under populism. Formerly as a robust democracy in Latin America, Venezuela is now under an authoritarian regime that regularly commits human rights violation. The nation is a prime example of rapid and thorough disintegration of democratic system. This paper concentrates on the backslide of Venezuela's democracy as a case study on the effects of populism on global democracies.

To fully explore Venezuela's populism, this paper focuses on adopting political philosopher Max Weber's theory on charismatic leadership to analyze populism and populist leaders. Weber was arguably the foremost social theorist of the twentieth century who had a wide-range of contributions to social sciences. In the realm of political science, Weber was famous for exploring the nature of political domination and legitimacy, which included thorough analyses on the role of charismatic leadership in democratic governments [2]. Weber's ideas are essential at understanding the nature of populism in terms of basic political theories.

Despite that many researchers have focused on populism and democratic recession in Venezuela, this paper takes the unique perspective of analyzing Venezuela's political situation through Max Weber's theories. This approach can bring new insights to this already researched topic because Weber's concept of charisma is not yet fully explored in the context of populism and democratic breakdown in Venezuela. For the most part, this empirical study does not utilize statistical models and evidence because it does not seek to quantify political phenomena. Instead, this paper cites numerous past researches on the rise of populism in Venezuela and primary sources of writings and speeches related to the topics discussed. This brings focus to the nuances of the complexity of populism's effects on democracy.

This study first elaborates on Max Weber's theory on charismatic leadership. Systematically, Weber summarized crucial characteristics that defines charismatic leaders and their significance in democracies. Then, this paper presents the history of Venezuela's democratic breakdown, starting with its initial political stability to latter turmoil. Specifically, this section utilizes Weber's theory to explain the rise of populism, focusing on the charismatic characteristics of populist leaders. Based on the history of Venezuela, this paper analyzes the potential effects of populism on the Venezuelan democracy, with emphasis on Weber's interpretation of charisma. With analyses, this paper shows the connection between populism and democratic breakdown in Venezuela. Lastly, the conclusion section presents the significance of Venezuela's democratic breakdown to other liberal democracies. This section concludes the effects of populism on democratic institutions and the necessity to take preventive actions against this ideology.

2. Weber's Theory of Charismatic Leadership in Democracies

To Max Weber, humanity is progressing towards a direction of ultimate disenchantment, which is a concept with direct translation from German as "de-magicification". With the advancement of science and rationalization in society, people begin to lose faith in the beliefs such as religion and trust science instead. In a disenchanted world, as Weber puts it in *Science as a Vocation*, people believe that "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" [3]. However, Weber feared that humans will eventually be trapped in meaningless bureaucratization and calculations as science has no meaning to life but deconstructed other sources of beliefs and values [2]. As a solution to disenchantment, Max Weber favored the approach that democracy can inject charisma into the spiritually deadened world through elected charismatic leaders.

Charisma, as described by Max Weber, is "the specifically creative revolutionary force of history" [5]. For a leader to be charismatic, he is "considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities" [4]. In a plebiscitary model of democracy, charismatic leaders are given a platform to demonstrate their charisma to the public and legitimize their rules thereby through elections. Ideally in Weber's conception of democracy, the leader is "a popularly elected president, as the head of the executive" with the authority to "veto and the power to dissolve parliament" [5]. In such case, the elected leader stands completely independent from bureaucracy with no superior officials, and he has dominating executive power over other branches of the government.

Weber argued that charismatic leaders in plebiscitary democracy share several characteristics in common. First, the exceptional qualities of a charismatic leader are demonstrated through his success in political struggles. Particularly, a charismatic leader would show his heroism to the public in defeating electoral opponents, which would make the elected leader "the dictator of the electoral battlefield" [5]. Second, a charismatic leader declares new higher values and "demands new obligations" [4]. He carries a quasi-prophetic significance to his voters by speaking about the directions that society should progress. Lastly, in crises, the revolutionary aspect of charismatic leadership is intensified. Crises justify charismatic leaders in democracies, who "enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission", to overthrow "custom, law and tradition" [4]. Such a situation endows charismatic leaders with an opportunity to advocate for new values. Especially through

exploiting the emotionality of the crowd in public outlets, charismatic leaders can mobilize their supporters and re-enchant society with higher values.

As Weber wrote, “it is the recognition on the part of those subject to the authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma” [4]. In democracies, charismatic authority is routinized under electoral procedures to demonstrate the public recognition of a leader’s charisma. Losing elections signifies the loss of charisma for a politician, which deprives him of his political legitimacy. Therefore, Weber argues that under routinized electoral democracy, charisma would legitimize a leader’s rule while popular elections justify its form.

Ultimately, Weber believed that charismatic leadership in democracy can breed political and cultural innovations for the disenchanting modern society. The irrational and magical element of charisma can resist “mechanized petrification” suffered by the world [6].

3. Venezuelan Democratic Backslide

3.1 Pre-Chavez Era

Before the 1990s, Venezuela had one of the most robust democratic systems in Latin America. In 1958, three major political parties in Venezuela – Democratic Action (AD), Social Christian (COPEI), and Democratic Republican Union (URD) – signed the Punto Fijo Pact, which established a stable partisan system guided by democratic principles. All three parties agreed to respect the process and result of free elections, denouncing despotic leadership [7]. As a result, the Venezuelan democracy functioned stably. The Freedom House consistently marked Venezuela “free” as its Global Freedom Status from 1972 to 1992, which meant that civil liberties and political rights were adequately protected by the government [8]. Part of the reason for Venezuela’s stable politics was the boom of its oil industry in the 1970s that led to economic growth. During this time, Venezuela had the highest per capita income in the entire Latin America [9].

In the 1980s, the worldwide oil glut severely damaged the economy of Venezuela, which had previously relied on petroleum export. Inflation skyrocketed, and the Venezuelan government took on massive debt. Additionally, graft and mismanagement in the government became endemic [10]. To revive the declining economy, President Carlos Andrés Pérez campaigned to sever ties with multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but in 1989, he created an austerity program that contained a \$4.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund [11]. Subsequently, a series of violent protests known as Caracazo emerged against President Pérez, which led to an estimation of 300 to 400 deaths as a result of government suppression [12]. In the years ensuing the protests, discontent with Venezuela’s democratic government grew larger over time as the economy continued to perform disappointingly. In 1992, Hugo Chavez, a Lieutenant Colonel at the time, initiated two failed coups against the Venezuelan government. Although Chavez was jailed, he earned national fame and gained many supporters. Towards the end of the century, the Venezuelan democracy was at the brink of falling apart due to political instability and economic crises.

3.2 Chavez Populism

In the 1990s, five consecutive economic recessions had greatly widened the gap between the rich and poor. Poverty and discontent towards the ruling parties were prevalent [9]. Released from prison in 1994, Hugo Chavez began to campaign for president with a populist agenda that would fundamentally reshape the Venezuelan democratic system.

Populism typically embodies a political stance of representing “the people” against the corrupt “elite” [13]. The political ideology of Chavez was populist in nature. Chavez argued that history is a struggle by “the people” against imperialistic oppression. He claimed to present “the people” while the opposition leaders were corrupt elites who were the “lackeys of imperialism” [14]. Chavez also advocated for Bolivarianism, named after Simón Bolívar who led the war of independence against the Spanish Empire in Latin America. Bolivarianism advocated for a Marxist and nationalist agenda that sought to reinforce Venezuelan economic and political sovereignty. Chavez characterized

himself as the representative of the disenfranchised people and the new “liberator” of Venezuela [15]. In this narrative, anyone who opposed Chavez was not only against Chavez’s agenda but also the enemy to Venezuela. The consequence of the elections was also not merely about whether Chavez would be in office, but whether Venezuela would become “a truly strong and free country” instead of one that is “reduced once more to slavery and darkness” [14].

In the election of 1998, Hugo Chavez received 56.4 percent of the ballot cast, far beyond his challenger Henrique Salas Romer who received 39.5 percent of the vote. In nearly four decades of democracy, Venezuela witnessed the first time when the two traditional parties – Democratic Action and Social Christian – did not win the presidency [16]. The party of Chavez, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, began its prolonged and dominant rule in Venezuela. The electoral victory of Chavez was a manifestation of his charisma that legitimized his rule. He was personally responsible for his political agenda, and the voters rewarded him for his charisma by electing him to office.

3.3 The Fall of Venezuelan Democracy

Sworn into office as the 45th president of Venezuela in 1999, Hugo Chavez immediately began to pursue his populist agenda aggressively. Appealing to the large population of lower-class citizens, he aimed to eliminate poverty and create more equitable resource distribution. His first step was to rewrite the constitution, which would allow him to initiate Plan Bolivar 2000. Plan Bolivar 2000 was an antipoverty program that aggressively expand the government’s social responsibility through building infrastructures and providing social welfare [9]. However, the reform of the constitution also allowed Chavez and his party to consolidate power and remove checks and balances from the democratic system. Chavez converted the National Assembly from a bicameral legislative body into a unicameral chamber, which allowed Chavez to place more of his loyalists into the legislative positions. As the National Assembly became weakened, Chavez increased the power of the executive branch and instated his loyalists throughout the bureaucracy and military. Even more, the new constitution would allow the president to pass referendum at will [17]. These actions effectively limited the power of Chavez’s opposing parties. Institutional oversight was severely compromised, thus expanding the power of Chavez. Despite the significant deterioration of the democratic system, it is important to note that Chavez’s decisions received popular support from the general public, which facilitated him to consolidate power. This can be seen as the continual recognition of the general public towards Chavez’s regime, legitimizing his charismatic authority.

In 2004, Chavez enlarged the Supreme Court of Venezuela and appointed his loyalists as new Justices, further compromising the checks and balances in the government [18]. In 2009, the National Assembly passed the Organic Law of Education with Hugo Chavez’s support, which restricted the freedom of the press in Venezuela. Any information considered aggressive against Chavez’s Bolivarian ideology would be censored by the government [19]. This limited the opposition parties from utilizing the press to resist the dictatorial regime under Chavez. In the same year, a national referendum was passed that abolished the term limit for the president [20]. Until his death in 2013, Chavez was the president of Venezuela for 14 years, and his presidency signified the complete degradation of democracy in Venezuela.

4. Analysis

4.1 Polarization

In Max Weber’s conception, political struggle is an essential and iconic aspect of charismatic authority that rejects legal-rational reasoning in society. By Weber’s definition, Hugo Chavez’s populist ideologies would characterize him as a charismatic leader. Chavez’s rhetoric to represent “the people” against imperialism demonstrated a clear political struggle. Such political struggle defined and justified Chavez’s mission to transform the nation’s democratic system. Although Weber clearly favored political struggle as a means of resisting disenchantment, political struggle directly

contributed to extreme polarization in Venezuela. It was the main factor that led to the collapse of the Venezuelan democracy.

In a functioning liberal democracy, contests between political parties and candidates should never be in the forms of political struggles. Instead, elections would present clashes between different opinions represented by a variety of politicians. In this framework, electoral candidates respect each other's freedom to campaign under democratic principles. Political messages are directed rationally at policy-related issues without demonizing the oppositions. Therefore, the intensification of political struggle under Hugo Chavez was the first step toward the deterioration of the healthy liberal democracy in Venezuela. By claiming to represent "the people", Chavez antagonized the leaders from the traditional parties as corrupt elites, the *cogollos* and the *cupulas del poder* (the cabals and chambers of power), and the *escualidos* (the filthy ones) [21]. With the image that Chavez's oppositions were morally corrupt, he framed electoral contests as political struggles of the people's will against the elite. Effectively, this polarized politics into a true battlefield between politicians. In this battlefield, Chavez was not merely a courteous contender who respected democratic procedures but a true charismatic dictator who was in an honorable fight for "the people" to defeat his oppositions.

Utilizing the polarized political environment, Chavez could easily convince his supporters that the oppositions did not deserve the freedom to compete fairly. Because these opposition leaders represented the morally "wrong" people and interests, Chavez was justified to discard the democratic system's protection for the opposition leaders and supporters. Due to Chavez's charisma as the fighter for the political struggle, his supporters were willing to utilize the democratic system against itself by passing undemocratic referendums and voting for Chavez's policies. For example, Chavez's supporters had facilitated the curtail of private medias that gave negative coverage to him and supported opposition parties. Chavez and his supporters justified the restriction of the freedom of speech and press by arguing that these rights were subordinate to Bolivarianism [21]. To them, the oppositions to Chavez would only be obstacles to building a freer and stronger Venezuela, so censorship should be enforced against them.

When the oppositions to Chavez gradually lost the power to compete with him, the democratic system in Venezuela ceased to have necessary checks and balances on Chavez and his party. The result was the breakdown of democracy in Venezuela. All traditional parties that were demonized would lose their voting base over time as Chavez's power grew. At the end of his rule, Chavez could be reelected for life, and most institutional oversights were disposed. Any opposition leader would immediately become the enemy to "the people" because Chavez controlled the public media outlets that severely polarized politics with populism.

4.2 Messianic Significance

In a disenchanting world, rationalization and secularization will dominate society, and to counter this trend, charismatic leaders can propose higher values and lead the public towards greater goals. By constantly speaking to the people and guiding them under specific causes, charismatic leaders will have messianic significance. In the eyes of the public, charismatic leaders are not merely individuals who advocate for specific policies and goals. Instead, like religious prophets and saviors, charismatic leaders are seen as extraordinary individuals who possess certain innate characteristics that render them as the morally right rulers. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez was a charismatic leader because he embodied messianic significance as he advocated for his populist agenda, and such had detrimental damages on the Venezuelan democracy. Chavez's cult of personality led to unconditional support by his loyalists to pursue undemocratic agendas.

Democracy is built on the idea that the authority of the government belongs to the people rather than any politician or groups of individuals. In elections, political candidates are the representatives of different interest groups, and their power is derived from the people. By rationally focusing on national issues, voters decide which candidate can win the election, and ideally, they are free to remove any elected officials from office. Whenever an elected official deviates from being merely the representative of people's interest and becomes idealized by voters as a savior, a democratic

system opens the opportunity for that official to hold more power in undemocratic manners. Rather than questioning this official's conduct and limit his power through checks and balances, voters would be inclined to follow his commands, which corrupts the democratic system.

For Hugo Chavez, his messianic significance can be best seen in his public speeches and messages. Speaking directly to the general public, Chavez constantly exploited the emotionality of the crowd and painted himself as a messiah to lead Venezuela to greatness. In his campaign for election in 1998, Chavez spoke in his speech that "I declare the Venezuelan people to be God's People" and "I no longer belong to myself. I am only a straw in the wind" [22]. On the day when Chavez won the election, he spoke to the people that "Venezuela won, history won, the people won" [22]. These quotes painted Chavez as not just a politician but a historical hero, a savior that served the Venezuelan people. He presented himself as both divine and selfless, a combination of personal traits that can be seen from religious prophets in history. Furthermore, as an advocate of Bolivarianism, Chavez demonstrated huge respect for Bolivar and actively portrayed himself as the second Bolivar who would be a fighter for freedom and independence in Latin America. In his presidential inaugural speeches, Chavez constantly invoked this national hero, and his supporters drew comparisons between the two [23].

Especially for the poor and the disenfranchised population amidst Venezuela's economic recessions, Chavez's message was powerful because he represented hope and embodied justice. His divine image of saving the Venezuelan people inspired great admiration and fervent support. Chavez was not only seen as a representative of the people's will but the true divine hero that must be elected to fight for Venezuela's sacred Bolivarian missions. Consequently, because Chavez built an immensely strong cult of personality around his populist message and charisma, he had the power to utilize the popular opinion to deconstruct the Venezuelan democracy.

4.3 Appeal to Crises

The element of crisis serves to intensify the momentum for revolutionary changes under charismatic leaders according to Max Weber. When the world continues on its path towards disenchantment, incidents of chaos can distract people from their mundane rational concerns and justify a charismatic leader to undermine existing systems in society. For a charismatic leader to utilize the advantage of crisis, he must appeal to it in front of the public and stir extreme emotions for change. While Venezuela was under severe economic crises, Hugo Chavez appealed to a sense of urgency to save Venezuela from the predation of imperialism and corrupt elites, justifying his proposals to undermine the democratic system.

Hugo Chavez's populist message was built on the idea that the functioning political system in Venezuela was not serving the need of the people. He thought there must be remedies to politics in order to represent interest of the Venezuelans. More importantly, Chavez's populist message outlined a greater concern that Venezuela was involved in a national crisis, one that had historical significance to the restoration of Venezuela's dignity. Instead of concerning just the economic issues on surface, Chavez presented a crisis that entailed a political struggle between "the people" and the elite. The crisis was ideological in nature that based itself on Venezuelan nationalism. In Chavez's campaign speeches in 1998, he said "The rotten elites of the parties are boxed in, and they will soon be consigned to the trash bin of history", and he further stressed that "We are in times of the Apocalypse. You can no longer be on the side of the Devil and the side of God" [21]. Chavez framed his political efforts in the context of an apocalyptic narrative where Venezuela's fate was in the hands of the people. Chavez wanted the Venezuelan people to realize that they had to make a choice between the elites and Chavez. Choosing to believe Chavez's ideology meant the uprising of Venezuela in a new direction of prosperity while the opposite meant the downfall of the country.

The appeal to crisis was tremendously successful at convincing the Venezuelans to completely transform their democratic system. Although democracy was imbedded in the political culture of the nation since the 1960s, Chavez aggressively pursued undemocratic agendas that were believed by the Venezuelans to liberate the nation from crises. Changes to the constitution, massive implementation

of social programs, and crack down on civil liberties were all made possible by voters who believed that Chavez was rescuing Venezuela. The result, ultimately, was the total breakdown of democracy as Chavez consolidated more power over time.

5. Conclusion

Max Weber died in 1920, so he never lived to see the neo-authoritarian reinterpretation of charisma found in modern democratic societies. Contrary to Weber's idealized conception of charisma, the rise of populism associated with charismatic leadership has shown detrimental effects on the sustainability of liberal democracies. The democratic breakdown of Venezuela clearly shows the backlash of personal charisma. Hugo Chavez's cult of personality combined with his populist message polarized Venezuelan politics, deified his leadership, and appealed to ongoing national crises that demanded radical reformations to the democratic system. Consequently, from being one of the most stable democracies in Latin America, Venezuela is now an authoritarian state that struggles with economic and political instability.

Weber's theory on disenchantment deserves merit for calling attention to the prominence of rationalization in society, but his solution by using democracy to inject charisma into the spiritually deadened world is not a viable option for contemporary governments to adopt. Based on the example of Venezuela, to say the least, democracy cannot sustain with extreme charisma. Charismatic leadership puts liberal democracies at risk of descending into authoritarian systems. Specifically in the form of populism, charismatic leadership becomes a formidable and divisive force that can tear democratic systems apart.

The analyses in this paper should serve as reference for political researchers and policy makers on the potential impacts of populism on democratic institutions. In today's world where populism is prevalent in many countries, the democratic breakdown of Venezuela can become useful knowledge to the world. In efforts to preserve democratic principles, modern political actors should always be aware of charisma and its institutional threat to democracy when it evolves into populist leadership. Research in the future should focus on solutions to extreme charisma as well as preventive measures that democracies should take to suppress undemocratic forces.

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