How Populism Dies: Political Weaknesses of Personalistic Plebiscitarian Leadership

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THE GLOBAL WAVE OF POPULISM that gathered steam in the 2010s and achieved its most important victories in 2016 with the stunning Brexit referendum and the unexpected election of President Donald Trump has instilled great fear about the fate of liberal democracy across the world, even in advanced industrial countries. Observers in academia and far beyond have painted a dark picture, as symbolized by the black cover of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's best seller with the scary title *How Democracies Die*.[1] Indeed, high-profile cases of populist leaders who strangled democracy, ranging from Alberto Fujimori and Hugo Chávez in Latin America to Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Europe, easily come to mind. As a result, concern has been widespread and intense.[2]

Theoretical analyses indeed demonstrate and empirical analyses corroborate that populism seriously threatens democracy. The very definition of

[1]Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

[2]Mark Graber, Sanford Levinson, and Mark Tushnet, eds., *Constitutional Democracy in Crisis?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); and Cass R. Sunstein, ed., *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America* (New York: Dey St., 2018).

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populism, understood here as a political strategy that revolves around personalistic, usually charismatic leadership sustained by direct, uninstitutionalized connections to a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers,[3] suggests important risks to liberal pluralism. This agency-centered notion, which is especially useful for elucidating the political actions of populist governments and their regime effects, indicates that populism stands in fundamental tension with democracy.

After all, personalistic leaders see democratic institutions as obstacles to their overbearing, transgressive agency and therefore seek to dismantle liberal checks and balances while relentlessly concentrating power, seeking political hegemony, and eliminating democratic competitiveness. Moreover, the need to maintain their direct, uninstitutionalized, and therefore unreliable and fickle mass support induces these plebiscitarian politicians to supercharge their appeals by attacking presumed enemies, including the partisan opposition; because the amorphous and therefore helpless people require protection from pernicious foes, they have to rally around their leader. This constant confrontation undermines tolerance and destroys fair competition because the leader tries to stay in power by any means, including harassment and repression of the opposition. In all these ways, populism inherently jeopardizes democracy.[4]

Empirical analyses confirm that populism stands in tension with democracy. Wide-ranging statistical investigations uncover a significant correlation between populist governance and democratic backsliding, which can push countries into competitive authoritarianism and sometimes full-scale dictatorship, as in contemporary Venezuela.[5] Moreover, in-depth studies of emblematic cases demonstrate how savvy populist leaders can take advantage of formally democratic mechanisms to suffocate democracy from the inside. Through constituent assemblies,

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[3]Kurt Weyland, "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach," in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55–59.

[4]Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); and Kurt Weyland, "Populism and Authoritarianism," in Carlos de la Torre, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (London: Routledge, 2018), 319–333.

[5]Christian Houle and Paul Kenny, "The Political and Economic Consequences of Populist Rule in Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 53 (April 2018): 256–287; Jordan Kyle and Yascha Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy: An Empirical Assessment* (Washington, DC: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2018), accessed at https://institute.global/policy/populist-harm-democracy-empirical-assessment, 7 November 2021; Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell, Anna Lührmann, and Sandra Grahn, "Democracy and Populism" (Working paper 2019:91, Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2019), accessed at https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/a8/b9/a8b9f007-37fd-4f67-8955-f60e11bfef08/working_paper_91.pdf, 7 November 2021; and Paul Kenny, "The Enemy of the People," *Political Research Quarterly* 73 (June 2020): 261–275.

for instance, they can invoke popular sovereignty to dismantle liberal checks and balances; with their majoritarian support, they thus abridge minority rights.[6] Similarly, they can leverage their popular support to win control of legislatures, which then allows them to "take over" the judiciary.[7] Thus, in various ways, democratically elected populists can gradually undermine and eventually eliminate the democratic competitiveness that initially catapulted them into power. In the face of these cynical salami tactics, liberal democracy looks weak, vulnerable, and ultimately defenseless.[8]

For theoretical and empirical reasons, therefore, the outpouring of concern about the recent wave of populism has a strong rationale. Populist leaders do inherently threaten liberal pluralism. If personalistic chief executives manage to enact their political strategy and advance in their plebiscitarian push for power concentration, they end up suffocating democracy.

But although it has important justifications, the recent fear of populism has gone too far. Certainly, personalistic leaders *seek* to establish their unchallenged predominance, which would smother democracy. But they are far from always succeeding. Instead, many fail. As a result, populism is not nearly as universally damaging to liberal pluralism as it looks in theory. Fortunately, recent concerns overestimate the danger posed by personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Thorough investigations suggest a decidedly mixed picture: populism seems to destroy democracy only under specific, restrictive conditions.[9] To avoid unnecessary panic—never a good guide for theoretical reflection, empirical examination, and defensive and remedial political action—it is crucial to arrive at a realistic assessment of populism that recognizes and elucidates the threat but does not overrate it either.

After all, theoretical analysis shows that populism is a high-risk political strategy. While some charismatic leaders can gain amazing preeminence and asphyxiate democracy, this dangerous quest also holds many pitfalls and carries substantial probabilities of failure. In the high-wire act of pursuing political hegemony based on unorganized mass support and in confrontation with established elites, it is easy to fall. Therefore, many populist leaders do not succeed in undermining

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[6]Allan R. Brewer-Carías, *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chávez Authoritarian Experiment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Kim Lane Scheppele, "Autocratic Legalism," *University of Chicago Law Review* 85 (March 2018): 545–583.

[7]Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. 3.

[8]Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

[9]Kurt Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (June 2020): 389–406.

democracy. Moreover, quite a few of them refrain from initiating a serious attack on liberal pluralism, especially after a prior effort in their country has failed.

Indeed, statistical analyses find that only "24 per cent of populist leaders who assume office in a democratic country initiate democratic backsliding,"[10] and only one-third of populist governments effect significant democratic deterioration.[11] Wide-ranging comparative case studies confirm that populist chief executives suffocate democracy with such low frequency, only when fairly stringent conditions happen to coincide.[12] Interestingly, the emblematic instances of populist destruction of democracy, Fujimori, Chávez, Orbán, and Erdoğan—the only populist chief executives examined in Levitsky and Ziblatt's book and Robert Kaufman and Stephan Haggard's article[13]—constitute outliers to the statistical regularity that "most countries survive populist governments without experiencing democratic backsliding."[14] By considering only the few noteworthy cases of populist leaders who managed to smother democracy, a problematic "selection on the dependent variable," extant analyses paint too dark a picture. In reality, democracy often persists despite populist strangulation attempts, or it recovers quickly (albeit with blemishes) after their perpetrator's rule ends.

Thus, populism does not have the overwhelming power that recent observers have seen. The electoral victory of a personalistic plebiscitarian leader, while troublesome, is far from dooming liberal democracy. Fortunately, the intense concern that has erupted in recent years is not fully justified. To substantiate this point and thus complement recent studies that have investigated the conditions under which populist leaders do strangle democracy,[15] I examine "the other side," namely, the many problems and risks that populist chief executives face. After Levitsky and Ziblatt's book analyzed how democracies die, I conversely probe how, and how easily, populism can "die." For this purpose, the present article elucidates the mechanisms and pathways through which populist leaders prematurely fall from office and fail to asphyxiate democracy. After systematically examining a

[10]Kyle and Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy*, 17.
[11]Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Grahn, "Democracy and Populism," 9.
[12]Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy*; Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy."
[13]Robert Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, "Democratic Decline in the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (June 2019): 417–432.
[14]Kyle and Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy*, 17.
[15]Raúl L. Madrid and Kurt Weyland, "Conclusion," in Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid, eds., *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 154–186.

TABLE 1
The Political Fate of Populist Chief Executives

	Early "Death"	*Eventual Collapse*	*Insurmountable Constraint*
Băsescu, Romania, 2004–2007, 2007–2012, 2012–2014			(Weakened by two impeachments)
Berlusconi, Italy, 1994–1995, 2001–2006, 2008–2011	(Quick collapse of first coalition)	Scandals and precarious coalitions	
Bolsonaro, Brazil, 2019–present	(Mass protests and recurring demands for impeachment)		
Borisov, Bulgaria, 2009–2013, 2014–2017, 2017–present		(Faced sustained mass protests in 2020)	
Bucaram, Ecuador, 1996–1997	Irregular congressional removal		
Chávez, Venezuela, 1999–2013			
Collor, Brazil, 1990–1992	Impeachment in corruption scandal		
Correa, Ecuador, 2007–2017		Betrayal by handpicked successor	
Erdoğan, Turkey, 2002–present			
Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina, 2007–2015			Prohibition of second reelection
Fico, Slovakia, 2006–2010, 2012–2018		Collusion scandal and mass protests	
Fujimori, Peru, 1990–2000		Regime implosion in corruption scandal	
García, Peru, 1985–1990, 2006–2011			
Gutiérrez, Ecuador, 2003–2005	Irregular congressional removal		
Humala, Peru, 2011–2016			
Kaczyński, Poland, 2015–present			EU pressures
Kirchner, Argentina, 2003–2007			
Lugo, Paraguay, 2008–2012	Irregular express impeachment		
Matovič, Slovakia, 2020–2021	Resignation forced by coalition conflict		
Mečiar, Slovakia, (1990–1991), 1992–1994, 1994–1998	Scandals, coalition collapse, and electoral defeat		(EU pressures)
Menem, Argentina, 1989–1999			Prohibition of second reelection

(Continues)

TABLE 1 *(Continued)*

	Early "Death"	*Eventual Collapse*	*Insurmountable Constraint*
Morales, Bolivia, 2006–2019		Resignation forced by mass protest	
Orbán, Hungary, 2010–present			
Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Bulgaria, 2001–2005	Clear electoral defeat		(Conditionality of EU accession)
Serrano, Guatemala, 1991–1993	Forced resignation after failure of self-coup		
Toledo, Peru, 2001–2006			
Tsipras, Greece, 2015–2015, 2015–2019	Clear electoral defeat		EU pressures
Uribe, Colombia, 2002–2010			Prohibition of second reelection
Zelaya, Honduras, 2006–2009	Ouster by civil-military coup		
Zeman/Babiš, Czechia, 2013/2017–present	(Weakened by scandals and mass protests)		

variety of cases that exemplify populism's weaknesses, I document the frequency of these troubles and risks by assessing all populist governments in Latin America and Europe since 1985 (see Table 1).[16] While the multiplicity of cases and the complex interweaving of causal factors preclude determining the probability of these different types of populist downfall, the following analysis of the number and cumulation of—often self-inflicted—problems shows why many populist chief executives do not command the sustained and overwhelming clout required for destroying democracy.

The failures of populist leadership have more dramatic repercussions in Latin America's presidential systems because they often prompt extraordinary, irregular evictions of chief executives. After all, as presidentialism's critics have highlighted, fixed terms of office hinder the removal of failing presidents. In Latin American history, therefore, many populist leaders got their marching orders from the military, as the coups against Argentina's Juan Perón in 1955, Brazil's João Goulart in 1964, and Ecuador's José María Velasco Ibarra in 1935, 1947, and 1972 show. After the regional proscription of coups in recent decades, politicized impeachments, paralegal declarations of mental incapacity, or con-

[16]Table 1 draws on the largely congruent listings in Kenny, "The Enemy of the People," Appendix A; Kyle and Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy*, 25–27; and Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," 398.

tentious mass protests nowadays fulfill the same function of forcing unscheduled, sometimes strikingly early terminations,[17] as the ousters of Ecuador's Abdalá Bucaram after a mere six months and of his compatriot Lucio Gutiérrez and Brazil's Fernando Collor after two and a half years show. Involving enormous controversy and conflict, these presidential crises are particularly lethal to the careers of failing populists; as Table 1 shows, no irregularly evicted leader in contemporary Latin America ever returned to the presidency.

By contrast, parliamentary systems in Europe institute regular procedures for removing unsuccessful prime ministers, such as votes of no confidence or the replacement of governing coalitions. Consequently, failing populists can be removed more easily, before political deterioration and conflict reach the intensity that triggers the unusual procedures of impeachment or provokes mass protests in Latin American presidentialism. Such a less controversial downfall imposes lower stigma, however; therefore, it allows for political comebacks. Accordingly, after rapid early failures, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Slovakia's Vladimír Mečiar managed to recapture the premiership on two additional occasions. But the strenuous opposition that these efforts at resurrection provoked, and the constant risk of renewed coalition collapse in European multiparty systems, limited the returning prime ministers' political clout, and therefore the damage they could do to democracy. Thus, although European populists suffer fewer early deaths than their Latin American counterparts, their endangered survival constrains their destructiveness. Overall, therefore, the institutional framework of governance does not significantly affect the risk that populism poses to liberal pluralism.[18]

Interestingly, the underlying strength of the institutional framework has similarly counteracting effects on the success or failure of populist chief executives. Brittleness and instability expose these leaders to considerable risks of early downfall, as the legally questionable ousters of Ecuador's Bucaram and Gutiérrez show. Yet, while greater institutional strength protects populists against such irregular evictions and helps prolong their rule, it constrains their power concentration, for instance, through independent judiciaries, which were crucial for safeguarding democracy in Colombia under Álvaro Uribe

[17]Kathryn Hochstetler, "Rethinking Presidentialism," *Comparative Politics* 38 (July 2006): 401–418; and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[18]Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," 398.

and in Italy under Berlusconi. As regards strong party systems, they preclude electoral victories by populists. But in weaker party systems in which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders do gain power, the corrosive effect of populism undermines the remaining parties. Their diminishing strength therefore does not operate as an independent variable with significant causal impact on the political fate of populism and democracy—the topics of this article. Altogether, then, institutional factors affect the *ways* in which many populist chief executives fall and the *ways* in which they fail to destroy democracy, but not the survival of liberal pluralism overall.

The present study focuses on these mechanisms and processes of populist failure, rather than examining the conditions under which these conflicts are likely to erupt, a topic that recent writings have already elucidated.[19] In this way, it tries to provide a deeper understanding of why populism is much less capable of strangling democracy than many observers have feared. The analysis documents democracy's good chances of survival. But it acknowledges that even failing populists can undermine the quality of democracy, especially through the further dismantling of party systems. The full impact of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership is the subject of the penultimate section, which examines democracy's revival after populism's "death."

Moreover, my emphasis on the risks inherent in populism's political strategy does not deny that a number of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders succeeded in resolutely concentrating power and establishing political hegemony, sometimes for a decade or more (such as Fujimori and Chávez). Under certain conditions,[20] populist chief executives did prevail, even in serious confrontations; Chávez, for instance, from 2001 to 2004 survived mass demonstrations, a coup attempt, a business lockdown, and a recall referendum. But he did so very narrowly, and partly because of accidental factors, such as the sudden rise of international oil prices in 2003, which allowed him to boost social spending and thus turn likely defeat in the recall referendum into victory.[21] On the other hand, populist terminations can result from exogenous, even chance factors as well, as in Chávez's death from cancer in 2013. Thus, the high risks of populism predict a considerable probability of early downfall or sustained weakening, but not universal failure. And besides

[19]Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy*; and Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy."
[20]Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy."
[21]Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chavez* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 24–26.

the problems inherent in populism's confrontational approach, a variety of context factors, including exogenous crises and even accidents, shape personalistic plebiscitarian leaders' likelihood of success—and the resulting pressure on liberal democracy.

INHERENT WEAKNESSES OF POPULIST LEADERSHIP

Current concerns about populism's upsurge highlight the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of liberal democracy, especially its susceptibility to "incumbent takeover":[22] democratically elected leaders can try to leverage their popular support and institutional attributions to dismantle democracy from the inside, for instance, by pushing through constitutional changes to concentrate power.[23] By drawing on plebiscitarian acclamation from "the people," populist politicians seem especially well positioned to suffocate democracy in this sneaky way.

While acknowledging this danger that democracy may self-destruct, the present article seeks to contribute to a more balanced assessment of populism's threat to democracy by demonstrating that personalistic leaders also suffer from significant vulnerabilities and can easily self-destruct as well. Charismatic politicians who lack organized sustenance and therefore appeal for fervent plebiscitarian support from a heterogeneous mass of people by declaring war on the political establishment run considerable risks. Success is far from guaranteed; failure is more likely.

The weaknesses and vulnerabilities of populism, which often allow democracy to trump populism,[24] emerge from its very core, namely, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, which leads to three types of problems:

(1) The preeminence of a supremely confident leader entails frequent mistakes and misdeeds, which undermine performance and erode mass backing, populists' principal asset.
(2) Overbearing personalistic leaders have difficulty building firm support among important political actors and provoke dangerous, if not lethal counterattacks from establishment forces.
(3) Hampered by these weaknesses, many populist chief executives run into institutional checks and balances and external constraints.

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[22]Milan Svolik, "Which Democracies Will Last?," *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (October 2015): 715–738.
[23]Scheppele, "Autocratic Legalism"; and Haggard and Kaufman, *Backsliding*.
[24]Weyland and Madrid, *When Democracy Trumps Populism*.

As a result of these three problem clusters, numerous populist leaders "die," while survivors are often too weak to strangle democracy.

Populist Leaders' Tendency toward Mistakes and Misdeeds

In the complex world of modern politics with its many difficult problems, populism's reliance on a personalistic leader holds considerable pitfalls. While having an advantage in decisive agency, a single leader risks errors and missteps.[25] Group psychology and organization theory show that collegial mechanisms, which marshal a plurality of viewpoints and allow for cross-checking, improve decision quality.[26] But convinced of their own supernatural powers, charismatic leaders often shun advice, not to speak of criticism; instead of consulting with "the best and the brightest," they surround themselves with cronies, loyalists, and sycophants. President Trump's disparate and constantly changing team, for instance, was unimpressive in intellectual caliber. The bumbling chaos in the White House produced an unprecedented stream of errors and mistakes, which, especially through weak performance in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to Trump's notable failure to win reelection.

Populism's error-proneness is especially damaging to economic performance, a crucial base of popular support. As Max Weber's seminal theory of charisma already emphasized, reliance on intuition and unbounded agency makes leaders disregard economic rationality, with dire consequences.[27] Overconfidence and exorbitant promises frequently entail overspending, which fuels inflation and debt explosion. When corrections become unavoidable, populist leaders often resort to politically attractive but economically damaging miracle cures, such as price and exchange controls, which exacerbate distortions. Sheer willpower cannot fix an economy in the era of globalization. Thus, there is a big risk of economic failure, which can erode populists' mass backing.

By relying on bold agency, populism also has difficulty coping with many crises. While personalistic leaders obtain a tremendous boost from combating dramatic problems that determined countermeasures can end

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[25]On the frequency of political leaders' mistakes and their serious consequences, see Daniel Treisman, "Democracy by Mistake," *American Political Science Review* 114 (August): 792–810. Populism exacerbates this proneness to error.

[26]Jonathan Bendor, *Bounded Rationality and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 28–29, 36–44, 163–169; and Elizabeth Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making," *International Organization* 71 (Suppl. 2017): S219–S247.

[27]Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 5th ed., trans. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1976), 656.

quickly, such as hyperinflation, they are at a loss when challenges are not susceptible to magical solutions. A stubborn crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic reveals populism's trust in the extraordinary, supernatural capacity of charismatic leaders as misguided: the self-proclaimed savior fails to save! Whereas Alexander the Great cut the Gordian knot with one bold sword blow, such heroic stunts cannot defeat a new disease vector. Yet populist leaders are averse to, if not incapable of using the only feasible approach, namely, patient and systematic, expert-guided efforts at gradual alleviation. Exogenous shocks can therefore create stumbling blocks for populist leaders.

Besides being prone to mistakes and performance problems, populist leaders also tend to engage in escalating misdeeds, especially exorbitant corruption,[28] which—when revealed—can drain their mass support and jeopardize their rule. The effort to expand personalistic leadership by dismantling accountability mechanisms allows for massive graft. And to compensate for the absence of organization, leaders use corruption to buy collaboration and hold the governing team together. Indeed, corruption serves as a control mechanism, giving the leader enough "dirt" on any underling to threaten them with destruction—unless they keep obeying. To secure their uninstitutionalized, precarious rule, populists commonly use this unsavory means for forcing compliance. When evidence of this proliferating bribery emerges, however, it threatens populists' images as "men of the people," depresses their reelectoral prospects, and can explode in high-profile scandals that trigger impeachment.[29]

In sum, several aspects and repercussions of personalistic leadership risk undermining populists' unorganized mass support, the main—but shifty—ground they stand on.

The Difficulties and Risks of Dealing with Other Political Forces

In their strenuous and jealous quest for personal supremacy, populist leaders also have difficulty dealing with other powerful politicians, who harbor their own ambitions and are unwilling to remain permanent subordinates. While potential rivals may opportunistically support a populist leader who commands overwhelming strength, a reversal of political fortunes, which error-prone populism and its fickle popular backing can always suffer, fuels infighting, desertions, and betrayals. On

[28]See Milada Vachudova, "Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe," *East European Politics* 36 (August 2020): 318–340, at 327–328.
[29]Hochstetler, "Rethinking Presidentialism"; and Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment.*

a stage with big egos, these tensions and conflicts can easily turn troublesome, even fatal, for a leader with fading charisma.

Moreover, to intensify their uninstitutionalized mass support, populists claim to save the people from pernicious enemies, especially establishment forces, whom they relentlessly attack. Yet this constant confrontation incurs serious risks. After all, the antagonized elites command substantial power capabilities, with which they oppose the populist aggressor and potentially launch a counterattack. Weakened by the problems and deficits highlighted under problem (1), numerous personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have fallen to such a backlash and "died" in impeachments, coups, or other irregular evictions. As populists' vulnerabilities cumulate and reinforce each other, as their popularity fades and their political support dwindles, establishment sectors eagerly retaliate against their erstwhile tormentors and try hard to end their reign.

Institutional and External Constraints to Populist Leadership

Even when populist leaders avoid premature "death," their weaknesses often prevent them from overcoming institutional constraints, especially when checks and balances have some resilience and firmness. While institutional strength is difficult to assess and the risk of tautology looms, a long-standing, rarely amended constitution such as the U.S. charter, or an independent judiciary that regularly diverges from executive preferences as in Colombia, constitute obstacles that personalistic leaders with questionable performance and limited mass support are unable to push aside. While such mighty fortresses are safe, populism's debilities hinder even assaults on democracies of middling institutional strength.

In the era of globalization, many populist leaders also face powerful external constraints and pressures. After all, the United States (before President Trump) and the European Union (EU) are committed to the defense of liberal democracy. Consequently, where linkages to "the West" are dense and leverage is significant,[30] populist efforts to abolish liberal pluralism can provoke weighty countermeasures, including the threat of sanctions; strong U.S. pressure, for instance, forced Fujimori after his self-coup of 1992 to back off from his original plan to install open authoritarianism.[31] Interestingly, international protectors of democracy

[30]See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[31]Yusuke Murakami, *Perú en la era del Chino*, 2nd ed. (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2012), 309–313.

may be surprised by a first assault,[32] but then try even harder to prevent its repetition, as the immediate and particularly heavy pressure from the Organization of American States on self-coup leader Jorge Serrano in Guatemala in 1993, an imitator of Fujimori, suggests.[33] Similarly, the EU has undertaken especially energetic and forceful efforts to forestall democracy's dismantling in contemporary Poland, which seeks to follow Orbán's Hungary;[34] indeed, Brussels recently strengthened its mechanisms for combating illiberal machinations.[35]

Of course, these foreign efforts to protect democracy are not guaranteed success; their impact depends on the resource needs as well as the ideological and geopolitical orientation of a populist chief executive. Neoliberal populists who need Western support for their structural adjustment plans and eagerly seek foreign investment are especially vulnerable. Their room for maneuver shrinks further if they depend on voluminous financial aid, as, for instance, Colombia's Uribe did during his prolonged struggle against the country's entrenched drug traffickers and guerrilla movements. To keep the ample funds of "Plan Colombia" flowing, the Colombian populist felt compelled to comply with U.S. demands and expectations,[36] which precluded democracy's strangulation. By contrast, "anti-imperialist," state-interventionist Chávez in neighboring Venezuela, who was flush with petrodollars, ready to antagonize Western capital, and eager to align with autocratic powers China and Russia, managed to evade these pro-democratic constraints and pushed resolutely toward authoritarianism—yet at the cost of ruining Venezuela's economy.[37]

In sum, populism inherently is a risky political strategy because it revolves around personalistic leadership sustained by quasi-direct, uninstitutionalized mass support. Unbounded agency and lack of a solid,

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[32]Julio Carrión, "Conclusion: The Rise and Fall of Electoral Authoritarianism in Peru," in Julio Carrión, ed., *The Fujimori Legacy: The Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism in Peru* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 310–311.

[33]Francisco Villagrán de León, "Thwarting the Guatemalan Coup," *Journal of Democracy* 4 (October 1993): 117–124, at 119, 122, 124; and Craig Arceneaux and David Pion-Berlin, "Issues, Threats, and Institutions," *Latin American Politics and Society* 49 (Summer 2007): 1–31, at 15.

[34]Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 202, 208–209, 213–227; and Elisabeth Bakke and Nick Sitter, "The EU's *Enfants Terribles*: Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe since 2010," *Perspectives on Politics*, published online 24 July 2020, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720001292.

[35]*The Economist*, "The European Union Budget: Locked and Loaded," 19 December 2020, 82.

[36]Álvaro Uribe, *No Hay Causa Perdida: Memorias* (New York: Celebra, 2012), 182–185, 239–241.

[37]Javier Corrales, "The Repeating Revolution," in Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, eds., *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47–55.

reliable support base turn populism into a high-wire act. Some charismatic leaders achieve enormous success, exploit it to boost their power and autonomy, and indeed manage to destroy democracy. But many populists fall prey to their own mistakes and misdeeds or to the political conflicts provoked by their penchant for confrontation, or they fail to win the overwhelming support required for pushing aside the constraints safeguarding democracy. Contrary to the fears of recent observers, who focus too exclusively on the few emblematic cases of populist "success" and democratic downfall, many populist leaders run into stubborn obstacles or suffer an ignominious eviction, allowing democracy to survive (even if diminished in quality through polarization and conflict).

HOW POPULISM CAN "DIE"

Personalistic Leadership and Its Precarious Mass Support

The error-proneness of personalistic leaders. Revolving around one supreme leader, populism as a political strategy is structurally prone to errors. This centralized approach to decision-making privileges bold initiative and decisive action over wide-ranging consultation, systematic deliberation, and thorough preparation. Brazilian populist Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992) encapsulated this wager on frontal attack when announcing that with one shot he would kill the tiger of inflation,[38] which was spiraling out of control right before his inauguration in March 1990. To avert a catastrophe, the brash new president had his inexperienced, heterogeneous economic team elaborate a daring adjustment plan, which went to the extreme of freezing people's bank accounts above $1,100.[39] Yet this heavyhanded shock treatment, which contradicted Collor's broader plan of economic liberalization, quickly failed to extinguish inflation. And as the headstrong president refused to build a support coalition and instead attacked the powers that be, his lack of economic success made him vulnerable to his own brother's corruption allegations, which prompted his ignominious impeachment in late 1992.[40] Thus, populism is prone to errors, and the resulting difficulties in combating urgent problems can easily turn politically dangerous because populist leaders lack the organizational backing to ride out low performance.

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[38]See Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, *Os Tempos Heróicos de Collor e Zélia* (São Paulo: Nobel, 1991), 30.
[39]Bresser Pereira, *Os Tempos*, 8, 12–14, 17–30; see also Clovis de Faro, *Plano Collor* (Rio de Janeiro: LTC, 1990).
[40]Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment*, 95–98, 149–152.

Ecuador's Abdalá Bucaram (1996–1997) made the opposite mistake. Rather than picking a disparate set of youngsters as economic advisers, he contracted world-famous Domingo Cavallo, who had succeeded in eliminating Argentina's stubborn hyperinflation with the miracle cure of currency convertibility, designed to impose iron economic discipline. By boldly attacking Argentina's long-standing scourge, Cavallo's adjustment plan had aligned with President Carlos Menem's populism (1989–1999), and the economic boom unleashed by the sudden extinction of inflation carried Menem to reelection in 1995.[41] Thus, in Argentina, Cavallo's recipe had achieved fabulous success. But what the inexperienced Bucaram, who enjoyed calling himself "El Loco" (the crazy one), failed to consider was that Cavallo's stringent convertibility plan had been feasible in Argentina as the desperate last resort to stamp out recurring hyperinflation (4,923 percent in 1989). Ecuador, however, was not in the throes of hyperinflation. Cavallo's quick fix, which entailed painful austerity and controversial reforms such as privatization, therefore provoked growing opposition.[42] "Crazy" Bucaram had mis-learned from a foreign success and fallen for a magical cure that did not fit his country's problems.[43] Populist eagerness to make a big splash won out over thorough preparation and prudent deliberation. Bucaram quickly paid the price as irate citizens protested and Congress took his nickname seriously by ousting him with a constitutionally problematic declaration of mental incapacity.[44] Thus, personalistic leaders easily make a variety of serious mistakes, and the political cost can be very high.

Charismatic leaders' inability to cope with stubborn crises. While prone to mistakes in boldly combating crises, populist leaders are also stumped by stubborn problems that are not susceptible to "magical" solutions, such as the coronavirus. After all, charismatic politicians claim a supernatural capacity to resolve acute, severe crises and save their followers. Yet while resolvable crises such as hyperinflation offer great opportunities for demonstrating these miraculous powers, a dangerous disease that jeopardizes public health and economic functioning cannot be defeated by a bold, daring countermeasure. A challenge that lacks a quick solution reveals the limitation of populist

[41]Javier Corrales, *Presidents without Parties: The Politics of Economic Reform in Argentina and Venezuela in the 1990s* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), 214.
[42]Flavia Freidenberg, "¡En tierra de caciques!," *Revista Opera* 16 (January–June 2015): 99–130, at 115–116.
[43]Hernán Ibarra, "La caída de Bucaram," *Ecuador Debate* 40 (April 1997): 21–33, at 24–25.
[44]Andrés Mejía Acosta and John Polga-Hecimovich, "Coalition Erosion and Presidential Instability in Ecuador," *Latin American Politics and Society* 53 (Summer 2011): 87–111, at 101; and Carlos de la Torre, *De Velasco a Correa* (Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2015), 94–97, 126–127.

leadership and undermines the claim to charismatic prowess:[45] the tiny disease vector catches the emperor naked! Refusing to acknowledge this uncomfortable predicament, populist leaders across the world, ranging from leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador to rightist Jair Bolsonaro, from Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to pseudo-Christian Donald Trump, reflexively tried to ignore and downplay the challenge. As this magical effort to wish away the crisis predictably failed, the valuable time wasted and the incompetent response that finally emerged—a product of populism's reliance on the personalistic leadership of untested outsiders, their haphazard, arbitrary approach to problem-solving, and their inherent distrust of expertise—entailed a substantial aggravation of the problem. Brazil's Bolsonaro eventually admitted his helplessness: "What do you want me to do?!? I am Messias [his middle name], but I cannot do miracles."[46] This deterioration exposed populist leaders to serious political danger, as the calls for the impeachment of Bolsonaro starting in his second year in office and resuming in 2021 showed.[47] Indeed, Slovak prime minister Igor Matovič was forced to resign in March 2021, after only one year in office, because of his government's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis.

An exogenous crisis that laid bare long-standing mistakes—namely, massive overspending during a boom and unpreparedness for the predictable bust—also brought the surprising downfall of populism in contemporary Ecuador. The sudden drop in international petroleum prices in late 2014 hit this oil-exporting country hard and caused serious economic problems.[48] Relying on pure populism and lacking the social movement base that helped sustain his colleague Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa faced mounting protests and saw support among his fickle followers wane. To avoid the imposition of repressive authoritarianism that his Bolivarian friend Nicolás Maduro spearheaded in Venezuela, the Ecuadoran populist decided to sit out the next presidential term and have a handpicked successor pay the political cost of the unavoidable economic adjustment.[49] Since personal loyalties are undependable, however, and since resentment toward Correa's confrontational approach and power

[45]See Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 140–141, 655–656.
[46]"'E daí?', diz Bolsonaro sobre número recorde de mortes por Covid-19 no Brasil," *Jornal do Brasil*, 29 April 2020, accessed at https://www.jb.com.br/pais/politica/2020/04/1023526--e-dai----diz-bolsonaro-sobre-numero-recorde-de-mortes-por-covid-19-no-brasil.html, 29 April 2020.
[47]Naiara Galarraga Cortázar, "La caótica gestión de la pandemia impulsa las peticiones de 'impeachment' contra Bolsonaro," *El País*, 27 January 2021.
[48]John Polga-Hecimovich and Francisco Sánchez, "The Persistence of Old Habits: Ecuador's Return to Political Instability," *Journal of Democracy* (forthcoming).
[49]Catherine Conaghan, "Delegative Democracy Revisited," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 109–118, at 116–117.

concentration had built, this protégé immediately turned against his benefactor, tried to block Correa's return to the presidency through a plebiscite limiting presidential reelections, and even pressed corruption charges against his predecessor. A crisis not susceptible to a magical solution thus led to the surprising defeat of Correa's populism, which allowed for the quick, albeit imperfect, recovery of Ecuador's asphyxiated democracy.[50]

Personalistic misdeeds: Cronyism and corruption. Besides its error-proneness and its congenital incapacity to cope with stubborn problems and exogenous shocks, populism's reliance on personalistic leadership also brings a tendency to misdeeds that aggravate its political vulnerabilities. Averse to strong organizations, which would hem in their overbearing power, populist leaders construct their political coalitions and governing teams in personalistic ways by using existing loyalties and by buying the allegiance of additional individuals. Many employ family members and close friends to ensure reliable cooperation. Besides this nepotism, they extend their networks through favoritism and corruption. Opportunities for private enrichment create powerful incentives for collaboration and support. Corruption also serves as a control mechanism because involvement in misdeeds holds underlings hostage and guarantees their allegiance.

But corruption, which under headstrong leaders with weak accountability can balloon to grotesque proportions—such as the $1 million that Bucaram's 19-year-old son allegedly accumulated as a customs official appointed by his father—also carries grave political risks.[51] Many populists have suffered losses in popularity and electoral costs once their infractions came to light. Allegations of bribery and conflict of interest, and repulsion at the manipulations and tricks employed for covering up these misdeeds, persistently dogged Berlusconi in Italy[52] and Mečiar in Slovakia; scandals contributed to Mečiar's career-inflecting defeat at the polls in 1998[53] and to Bucaram's eviction in Ecuador in 1997.[54] Similarly,

[50]Carlos de la Torre, "Ecuador after Correa," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (October 2018): 77–88.
[51]Hochstetler, "Rethinking Presidentialism," 406–407; and Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment*, 87–131.
[52]Michael Shin and John Agnew, *Berlusconi's Italy: Mapping Contemporary Italian Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 104–105; and James Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi: A Study in Failure* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 94–99, 104–109, 203.
[53]Kevin Deegan-Krause, "Donald Trump and the Lessons of East-Central European Populism," in Weyland and Madrid, *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, 65–66.
[54]Ibarra, "Caída," 29; Simón Pachano, "Democracia a la medida," *Íconos* 1 (February 1997): 7–13, at 9–11; and Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment*, 106–109, 129–130.

high-profile corruption allegations gave the tottering government of Brazil's Collor the coup de grâce.[55] And the murder of an investigative journalist who had uncovered the web of cronyism and collusion extending from populist Prime Minister Robert Fico in Slovakia prompted an explosion of mass protest in 2018 that forced Fico's resignation[56] and propelled an anticorruption movement to election victory in 2020. Moreover, Andrej Babiš, a Czech version of Berlusconi,[57] was put on the defensive over interest conflicts and fraud, facing a no-confidence vote in 2018, massive protests in 2019–2020,[58] and, finally, electoral defeat in 2021.

The most striking case of populist self-immolation through mega-corruption occurred in Peru. After his election in 1990, Fujimori—typically—obliterated the party system, undermined many state institutions, and took control of the judiciary.[59] Relying on pure personalism, the "Andean Samurai" built his rule on a wide-ranging network of corruption, literally buying support in Congress and the media. To enforce his paid supporters' loyalty with proof of their misdeeds, Fujimori's confidant videotaped the transactions. When evidence from this archive of bribery leaked, the domestic and international outcry was massive and forced Fujimori's resignation.[60] Thus, built without institutional scaffolding, Fujimori's populist rule collapsed like a house of cards. Coming on the heels of the president's second reelection victory in 2000, this unexpected reversal of fortune demonstrated the brittleness of populism and allowed for the quick and successful restoration of democracy.

In sum, personalistic leaders' proneness to errors, their difficulties in confronting stubborn problems, and their frequent corruption jeopardize their mass support and carry serious risks of premature political death.

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[55]Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment*, 97–98, 125–126.

[56]Zora Bútorová and Martin Bútora, "The Pendulum Swing of Slovakia's Democracy," *Social Research* 86 (Spring 2019): 83–112, at 83–86; and Miroslav Nemčok and Peter Spáč, "The Rise and Sustainability of Party Leaders in Slovakia," in Sergiu Gherghina, ed., *Party Leaders in Eastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 247, 261.

[57]Seán Hanley and Milada Vachudova, "Understanding the Illiberal Turn in the Czech Republic," *East European Politics* 34 (August 2018): 276–296.

[58]Petra Guasti, "Populism in Power and Democracy in the Czech Republic," *Politics and Governance* 8 (December 2020): 473–484, at 480–481.

[59]Martín Tanaka, "Peru 1980–2000," in Frances Hagopian and Scott Mainwaring, eds., *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 270–279.

[60]Maxwell Cameron, "Endogenous Regime Breakdown," in Carrión, *The Fujimori Legacy*, 270–283; Carrión, "Conclusion," 312–313; and Murakami, *Perú*, 537–562, 576–585.

Personalistic Leaders' Difficult Relations with Established Politicians

Precarious coalition formation. Populism's overbearing leaders also have difficulty constructing firm, reliable coalitions with other political forces, which are often crucial for ensuring governability, most clearly in Europe's parliamentary systems with proportional representation. In their headstrong quest for supremacy, populist leaders are reluctant to forge compromises, especially with other alpha males. By relying on charismatic chieftains, populist movements lack firm commitment to programs and ideologies. Because opportunism and shiftiness prevail, there is no solid basis for coalition formation. Consequently, tensions and conflicts frequently erupt, especially where a populist chief executive needs support from another populist leader, as Italy's Berlusconi did. Indeed, "Il Cavaliere" saw his first government fall apart quickly because the Northern League's populist strongman feared being outshone and therefore defected in late 1994.[61] Political isolation, however, inflicted electoral losses on the League in Italy's coalition-rewarding voting system and induced it to resume a center-right alliance. But while Berlusconi enjoyed longer governing periods during the 2000s, cooperation remained precarious, weakening his government throughout.[62]

Interestingly, Berlusconi's need to rely on fickle, tension-ridden coalitions prevented constitutional reforms that could undermine Italian democracy. An ambitious project for strengthening prime ministerial powers and reducing other branches' prerogatives failed in a 2006 referendum because Berlusconi could not weave together the divergent interests inside his fractious center-right alliance; as the Northern League pushed for more decentralization, whereas extreme right-wingers advocated centralization, Il Cavaliere and his partners failed to mobilize sufficient popular support.[63] Weakened by intra-coalitional infighting, Berlusconi also lost the 2006 election—and Italian democracy survived unscathed. Thus, populism's pronounced personalism allowed only for weak governments; the last major analysis of Berlusconi's political performance is subtitled "a study in failure."[64]

Similarly, the impetuous urge of populist Matteo Salvini, current leader of the Northern League, to grab control of Italy's government

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[61]Shin and Agnew, *Berlusconi's Italy*, 75.
[62]Shin and Agnew, *Berlusconi's Italy*, 43–44, 100, 107–108; Stefano Fella and Carlo Ruzza, "Populism and the Fall of the Centre-Right in Italy," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 21 (May 2013): 38–52; and Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi*, 2, 11, 65–66, 93, 99, 106–108, 166, 200.
[63]Martin Bull, "Constitutional Referendum of June 2006," *Italian Politics* 22 (2007): 99–118; Shin and Agnew, *Berlusconi's Italy*, 67, 123, 128–132; and Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi*, 165–167, 174–175, 191–192.
[64]Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi*.

backfired drastically. When Salvini brashly broke his rocky coalition with the populist Five Star Movement in mid-2019, he inadvertently provoked the formation of a new governing alliance, which pushed him into the political wilderness.[65] While the chronic instability of Italian governments may allow for Salvini's comeback, his first assault on power roundly failed.

Slovakia's Mečiar could not count on his coalition partners either. Despite their relative weakness, these smaller parties blocked some of his power-concentrating projects, especially an "electoral reform … moving from proportional representation to a more plurality-based system."[66] This intra-coalition resistance prevented Mečiar's party from gaining the predominance that a similar change later cemented for Hungary's Orbán and probably contributed to the electoral defeat of the Slovak populist in 1998, ending his pressure on democracy. Party fragmentation and uncontrollable coalition partners also helped prevent Slovakia's later prime minister Robert Fico (2006–2010, 2012–2018) from gaining the political strength to undermine democracy.[67]

Fragile coalitions and governmental instability also dogged Romania's Traian Băsescu, who suffered two impeachments and temporary suspensions from office, leaving "his charisma in tatters."[68] Similarly, Czech populist Andrej Babiš (2017–present) was weakened by heading a minority coalition government that only narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in 2018 and that suffered electoral defeat in late 2021.[69] In turn, the domineering approach of Bulgaria's Boyko Borisov inside his first government hurt his public standing, helped provoke protests, and diminished his electoral chances. These setbacks weakened his clout in subsequent administrations and limited the threat he could pose to democracy.[70]

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[65]Alessandro Chiaramonte, Lorenzo De Sio, and Vincenzo Emanuele, "Salvini's Success and the Collapse of the Five-Star Movement," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 12 (June 2020): 140–154, at 151.

[66]Tim Haughton, "Vladimír Mečiar and His Role in the 1994–1998 Slovak Coalition Government," *Europe-Asia Studies* 54 (December 2002): 1319–1338, at 1334, see also 1332–1333.

[67]Soňa Szomolányi, "Slovakia's Elite," in Jan Pakulski, ed., *The Visegrad Countries in Crisis* (Warsaw: Collegium Civitas, 2016), 71, 79–80.

[68]Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Democracy on the Brink; Romania," *World Affairs* 175 (January 2013): 83–87, at 87; see also Dragoş Dragoman, "Post-Accession Backsliding in Romania," *South-East European Journal of Political Science* 1 (July–September 2013): 27–46, at 38–40; and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "Romania's Italian-Style Anticorruption Populism," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (July 2018): 104–116, at 108, 113.

[69]Hanley and Vachudova, "Understanding the Illiberal Turn," 277, 283, 289.

[70]Dobrin Kanev, "Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria 2013," *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 16, no. 1 (2013): 21–35; Petar Bankov, "The Fireman's Ball in Bulgaria?," in Sergiu Gherghina, ed., *Party Leaders in Eastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 60–63; see also Venelin Ganev, "'Soft Decisionism' in Bulgaria," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (July 2018): 91–103.

Thus, the common need for multiparty governments in parliamentary systems with proportional representation limits the personalistic latitude of populist chief executives and prevents them from establishing unchallengeable preeminence. In fact, with their headstrong personalities and their weak programmatic and ideological commitments, these leaders are especially ill prepared to forge and maintain firm, stable coalitions. Consequently, they suffer from continuing political vulnerability and face a substantial risk of eviction from office.

In presidential systems, chief executives also need parliamentary majorities to pass laws. Yet headstrong populist leadership and party weakness make cooperation difficult, especially in the presence of other populist leaders. In Ecuador, for instance, Lucio Gutiérrez's new party won only a minority of congressional seats in 2002, creating the need for coalition partners. Yet because, in typical populist arbitrariness, Gutiérrez betrayed his campaign promises,[71] he failed to find stable support. In this dance of alliances,[72] he eventually depended on the party of populist Abdalá Bucaram,[73] whose error- and corruption-driven downfall was analyzed earlier. Given the widespread revulsion against Bucaram, this audacious move provoked an outburst of popular protest, which gave the tottering reign of shifty and increasingly undemocratic Gutiérrez the coup de grâce.[74] Escalating mass demonstrations induced Congress to evict him under a legally problematic pretext. Thus, in Ecuador, unsavory relations with one populist turned politically fatal for another populist; in short order, two personalistic leaders lost office in strikingly similar ways.

In Paraguay, a country dominated by establishment forces, left-wing ex-bishop Fernando Lugo was in a precarious position from the beginning. He won election in 2008 only by allying with the old Liberal Party, the eternal opposition, which supported this populist outsider only in order finally to dislodge the long-hegemonic Colorados. Consequently, Lugo's typically populist efforts to enhance his autonomy and clout through reformist mass mobilization always faced active opposition and passive resistance from his coalition partners, including his own vice president. Because in the run-up to the next presidential contest of 2013, Lugo seemed to renege on the initial deal of supporting a Liberal politician as his successor, his allies abandoned the president in mid-2012

[71]Kenneth Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 267.
[72]De la Torre, *De Velasco*, 115–116.
[73]Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, "Coalition Erosion," 103.
[74]De la Torre, *De Velasco*, 119–126; and Freidenberg, "¡En tierra," 116–117.

and cooperated with the Colorados to seize on a violent land conflict and impeached Lugo in record time—little more than 24 hours.[75]

In sum, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders inherently face difficult relations with the coalition partners they often need, especially in parliamentary systems, but also under presidentialism. After all, the populist urge to expand maneuvering room and achieve political supremacy causes tensions and conflicts both with establishment politicians and with other populist chieftains.

Counterattacks by the political establishment. While populist leaders cannot easily build solid, reliable support, they provoke intense conflict, which can easily turn lethal. After all, opposition parties, associations in civil society, and powers that be often detest personalistic leaders and combat their power hunger, arbitrariness, and unaccountability. Populists, in turn, boost their mass support by constantly attacking these "elites" as selfish and corrupt. The resulting polarization allows plebiscitarian leaders to appeal to their followers as promoters of the general will against special interests and unjustified privileges. But, of course, this relentless confrontation also carries serious risks. Powerful establishment sectors often fight back and use their ample resources and clout to obstruct, defeat, and push out populist chief executives. Radical populism even provokes military contestation.[76] While the penchant for stirring up conflict is an inherent feature of populism, it jeopardizes leaders' political survival.

Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, for instance, turned from a right-winger into a left-wing populist when Hugo Chávez offered ample petroleum subsidies and a political blueprint for extending presidential power. Like his new Venezuelan mentor, Zelaya therefore pushed hard for the convocation of a constituent assembly, probably to prepare his own reelection. Congress, the courts, business, and a good part of civil society, however, feared such an emulation of Chávez's march toward political hegemony and authoritarianism. In this escalating controversy, the Honduran president refused to give up his aggressive plan. Therefore, the military eventually removed him on court orders.[77] As Congress followed

[75]Leiv Marsteintredet, Mariana Llanos, and Detlef Nolte, "Paraguay and the Politics of Impeachment," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (October 2013): 110–123, at 112–114; and Arturo Ezquerro-Cañete and Ramón Fogel, "A Coup Foretold: Fernando Lugo in Paraguay," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17 (April 2017): 279–295, at 286–293.

[76]David Kuehn and Harold Trinkunas, "Conditions of Military Contestation in Populist Latin America," *Democratization* 24 (October 2017): 859–880, at 866–867, 874.

[77]Mark Ruhl, "Honduras Unravels," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (April 2010): 93–107, at 93; and Kuehn and Trinkunas, "Conditions of Military Contestation," 871–872.

constitutional succession rules and installed an interim leader and as heavy international pressure did not achieve Zelaya's restoration to office, the pushy populist saw his bold power grab backfire and suffered an early career termination. Chávez also had a near-death experience in April 2002, when he narrowly escaped a similar coup attempt.[78] Indeed, the Bolivarian populist's subsequent push toward authoritarianism served as a powerful deterrent that steeled the determination of the Honduran opposition to prevent a repetition of the Venezuelan script in their own country.

Resistance and retaliation of establishment forces also played crucial roles when populist chief executives were ousted through regular electoral means, such as Berlusconi in 2006 and Mečiar in 1998,[79] or when they were evicted with the unusual means of presidential impeachments or irregular declarations of mental incapacity, such as Brazil's Collor in 1992, Ecuador's Bucaram in 1997, his eventual ally Gutiérrez in 2005, and Paraguay's Lugo in 2012. In all these cases, leaders of traditional parties, associations in civil society, and other power holders invoked the failings and scandals of personalistic leaders to arouse indignation and opposition. Pushed forward by growing protest movements and entrenched in the institutional framework, these oppositional forces trained their political weapons on the transgressors. Many populists "died" in these battles. In these ways, populism's irrepressible penchant for confrontation and polarization came back to haunt its instigators. As mentioned earlier, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership pursues a high-risk strategy, which often turns fatal for its protagonists, allowing democracy to survive, though with the scars resulting from these conflicts.

Unmovable Constraints

Strong domestic institutions. Besides "killing" numerous populist leaders, the political weaknesses discussed so far also limit the clout of those who avoid these death traps and restrict their capacity to bend or break the established institutional framework, as the example of Berlusconi's failed constitutional reform shows. Accordingly, even highly charismatic politicians such as Colombia's Uribe did not manage to abolish presidential term limits and perpetuate themselves in power.[80] This failure, which safeguarded Colombian democracy, was an important setback because

[78]Corrales and Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics*, 21–22.

[79]On Mečiar's defeat, see Nemčok and Spáč, "The Rise and Sustainability of Party Leaders in Slovakia," 243, 245, 251.

[80]Uribe, *No Hay*, 327–328; and Ana María Bejarano, "Politicizing Insecurity," in Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson, eds., *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 341, 345–346.

leaders who claim supernatural capabilities of problem-solving feel entitled and even obligated to run the government forever. Having to step down signals defeat, puncturing their magic and exposing them to attacks that could end their careers and jeopardize their personal freedom, given their earlier transgressions.

Consequently, populist chief executives initiate ceaseless campaigns to undermine institutional checks and balances and push through constitutional change to allow for successive reelections. Their ability to achieve such self-perpetuation depends on the strength of their own support, discussed in preceding subsections, as well as the solidity and resilience of the preexisting institutional framework. Prior institutional weakness paves the way for populist power grabs, as in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, where democracy was battered by coup attempts or serious presidential crises.[81] Consequently, Chávez, Morales, and Correa, who managed to boost their popularity by taking advantage of hydrocarbon windfalls, convoked constituent assemblies and thus engineered the right to reelection.[82]

By contrast, preexisting institutional strength hinders such power-concentrating machinations, especially when populist leaders do not forge a broad, firm support coalition. Colombia's Uribe, for instance, trusted in his sky-high approval ratings and never formed an encompassing hegemonic party, relying instead on a shifty welter of old and new formations to promote his projects in Congress.[83] His base's lack of organizational cohesion and political discipline weakened the president, contributed to the failure of an ambitious referendum on power-concentrating constitutional reform in 2003,[84] and allowed Colombia's unusually independent judiciary to limit his room for maneuver. Above all, the powerful Constitutional Court in 2010 prohibited Uribe's renewed candidacy,[85] ending his political supremacy and preventing democracy's strangulation. His reluctantly chosen successor made an immediate quest for independence,[86] which pushed Uribe into resentful opposition—and facilitated a notable recovery of liberal pluralism in

[81]Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment*.
[82]Weyland, "Populism's Threat."
[83]Harvey Kline, *Showing Teeth to the Dragons* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 63–64, 176–178, 183; see also Laura Wills-Otero, "Colombia: Analyzing the Strategies for Political Action of Álvaro Uribe's Government, 2002–10," in Juan Pablo Luna and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *The Resilience of the Latin American Right* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 200–203.
[84]Bejarano, "Politicizing Insecurity," 341.
[85]Uribe, *No Hay*, 327–328.
[86]Wills-Otero, "Colombia," 210.

Colombia.[87] In similar ways, Italy's strong and independent judiciary successfully reined in populist Berlusconi,[88] whose governments rested on precarious coalitions, as discussed earlier.

Of course, strong institutions also "kill" many aspiring populists at a much earlier stage in their careers by helping to forestall their election in the first place. Thus, Chile's entrenched party system has for decades blocked the electoral advance of populist politicians, ranging from outsider Francisco Javier Errázuriz in 1989 to Trump imitator José Antonio Kast in 2017. Similarly, proportional representation makes it difficult for populists to win majorities in Europe's parliamentary systems. And where they support but do not head the government, they often suffer political decline by compromising their antiestablishment appeal without having the opportunity to engineer their own political predominance. This dilemma hurt Austria's outstanding populist Jörg Haider after his party's strong but not overwhelming electoral showing in 1999,[89] as well as Dutch firebrand Geert Wilders after 2012. Institutional obstacles thus make the political lives of many personalistic leaders difficult and condemn quite a few of them to failure.

External constraints. In the era of globalization, populist chief executives also face external constraints, especially economic limitations and pressures. Certainly, left-wing nationalists such as Venezuela's Chávez try hard to gain room for maneuver, and they succeed during times of exceptional resource abundance, especially the commodities boom of the early 2000s.[90] But eventually, every boom goes bust, and their typical imprudence during the years of plenty comes to haunt personalistic politicians, as it happened to Ecuador's Correa. His savvy plan to cede power to a handpicked successor who would have to clean up the mess, and thus allow for Correa's return to power in the subsequent election, strikingly failed, as explained earlier. Thus, even leftist, "anti-neoliberal" populists often suffer the political fallout of global economic constraints, sooner or later.

For neoliberal populists, who governed several Latin American countries during the 1990s and 2000s, these external constraints were

[87]Lindsay Mayka, "Delegative Democracy Revisited," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 139–1–147, at 143-46.
[88]Cristina Dallara, "Powerful Resistance against a Long-Running Personal Crusade: Silvio Berlusconi," *Modern Italy* 20 (February 2015): 59–76.
[89]Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 280–281, 288.
[90]Corrales, "Repeating Revolution," 47–55.

always significantly tighter. As they opened their countries to the world economy, advanced industrialized countries, led by the United States, gained substantial leverage for influencing domestic political developments. Fears of depressing foreign investment and threats of sanctions indeed forced Fujimori to back away from his initial plan to impose open authoritarianism after this 1992 self-coup;[91] even stronger external pressures prompted the quick downfall of Guatemala's Jorge Serrano, who tried to imitate Fujimori's power grab in 1993. The Central American strongman ran afoul of the democracy-protection regime that the inter-American community had formalized in the early 1990s.[92]

Stringent external limitations also helped prevent Colombia's Uribe, another neoliberal populist, from overriding congressional checks and balances, engineering undemocratic hegemony, and disobeying court rulings, especially the prohibition of a second consecutive reelection in 2010. The Colombian president depended on the United States to help revive the economy and especially to combat long-standing guerrilla movements and drug traffickers that had unleashed increasing violence. As Washington amply subsidized his counterinsurgency efforts through Plan Colombia, Uribe faced insistent U.S. demands to respect human rights and political pluralism.[93] Confrontational efforts to strangle democracy, as they unfolded in neighboring Venezuela under Chávez, therefore faced prohibitive external obstacles in Colombia.

In similar ways, the EU has protected democracy on the Old Continent. Accordingly, Bulgaria's former czar Simeon Borisov von Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who, after his return from decades of exile, won the premiership with a populist strategy in 2001,[94] faced tight constraints as well. After all, his postcommunist country was eager to join the EU and NATO.[95] Accession required respect for democracy. Thus, the ex-monarch's hands were tied, whatever hopes for boosting his powers—not to speak of restoring his earlier monarchical glory—he may have harbored. As a result, his fleeting reign did no damage to Bulgaria's low-quality democracy.

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[91]Murakami, *Perú*, 309–313.
[92]Villagrán, "Thwarting the Guatemalan Coup," 119, 122, 124; and Arceneaux and Pion-Berlin, "Issues, Threats, and Institutions," 15–16.
[93]Uribe, *No Hay*, 182–185, 239–241.
[94]Emilia Zankina, "Theorizing the New Populism in Eastern Europe," *Czech Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 2 (2016): 182–199, at 189–190.
[95]Kristen Ghodsee, "Left Wing, Right Wing, Everything," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55 (May–June 2008): 26–39, at 28–29.

Strong EU pressures also limited the maneuvering room of Slovakia's Mečiar and contributed to his electoral defeat in 1998. To evade these constraints, Hungary's Orbán after 2010 moved at lightning speed and used his supermajority in perfectly legal ways to push through a new constitution, concentrate power, and undermine liberal democracy. Determined to forestall a repetition of this sneak attack, the EU has closely monitored, strongly criticized, and threatened to sanction the similar anti-pluralistic efforts spearheaded by the Law and Justice Party in Poland.[96] This external engagement, in turn, has motivated and protected domestic protesters, who have fought the undemocratic moves of the populist government at every step.[97]

In sum, weakened by their fickle mass support and their difficult relations with establishment forces, populist leaders often face fairly strong domestic institutions or external constraints. Even those chief executives who survive the minefield charted by their high-risk strategy therefore have difficulty pursuing their power hunger by dismantling democracy. Thus, because of the inherent weaknesses and risks of populism, many personalistic plebiscitarian leaders suffer an early political "death," experience the eventual collapse of their regimes, or encounter insurmountable obstacles in their insatiable quest for aggrandizement and self-perpetuation, as the assessment of all populist governments in contemporary Europe and Latin America in Table 1 shows. For these reasons, democracy often survives the danger arising from populism or enjoys a quick revival, though with varying degrees of vibrancy and quality.

The summary listing in Table 1 above reveals the risks inherent in populism. One-third of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders experienced an early downfall; in Latin America's presidential systems, none of them managed to stage a comeback. Many other populists were bruised and weakened in the confrontations they provoked and therefore did not succeed in overcoming the institutional or external constraints they faced. Certainly, however, risk does not equal inevitable failure; instead, about one-third of populist leaders controlled executive office for a decade or more, though in Europe's parliamentary systems, usually debilitated by interruptions, as Berlusconi's fate shows. For all of these reasons, only 6 of the 30 leaders examined in Table 1—similar to the rates found in statistical studies[98]—ended up suffocating democracy: Chávez, Correa, Erdoğan, Fujimori, Morales, and Orbán. Worried observers such

[96]Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*, 202, 208–209, 213–227; and *The Economist*, "The European Union Budget."
[97]Bakke and Sitter, "The EU's *Enfants Terribles*."
[98]Kyle and Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy*, 17; and Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Grahn, "Democracy and Populism," 9.

as Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight these "worst cases";[99] however, with this skewed focus, they overlook the salutary fact that a much larger number of populist leaders do not succeed with their nefarious efforts at power concentration and suppression of liberal democracy. In sum, populism certainly poses a threat; but fortunately, the populist path to success is rocky and steep, full of obstacles and often self-set traps.

DEMOCRACY'S FREQUENT REVIVAL AFTER POPULISM'S "DEATH"

After the downfall of populist leaders, democracy usually manages a rapid recovery. The incompetence and errors of personalistic politicians, their corruption and nepotism, their confrontational tactics and the resulting conflicts, and their persistent efforts to undermine political competitiveness and strangle liberal pluralism serve as deterrents that provide a strong impulse for reasserting and strengthening democracy as soon as populist rule ends. Such a turnaround occurred in Peru, where Fujimori's sudden resignation prompted the installation of an interim president who restored electoral fairness and respect for civil rights. Similarly, in Slovakia, the electoral defeat of Mečiar brought a revival of democracy after civil society and opposition parties, supported by the EU, had pushed for an end to governmental arbitrariness and promoted a return to the rule of law. And in Italy, problematic machinations and norm violations ended whenever Berlusconi lost power; his three stints as prime minister therefore left Italian democracy unscathed.[100]

Certainly, however, many of these restored or recovered democracies achieve only low to middling quality. The representational deficits of establishment parties and the severe problems or crises that allowed for populists' very rise left lasting repercussions by weakening civil society and political organizations. Populists' anti-institutional maneuvers exacerbated this damage by further dismantling the party system, and their penchant for confrontation stoked polarization and undermined democratic norms, including commitment to fair competition. Thus, even in the many instances of eventual victory, the struggle with populism can scar democracy.

Indeed, democracy's victory is never definitive. On the contrary, the party weakness that enabled plebiscitarian politicians to win power in the first place and was exacerbated by the corrosive effects of populist rule

[99]Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die.*
[100]Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, "Has Populism Eroded the Quality of European Democracy?," in Weyland and Madrid, *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, 94–98.

opened up ample opportunities for new personalistic leaders to rise in the resurrected democracies. Therefore, countries that fell into populism often ended up trapped in "serial populism."[101] By attacking established politicians and undermining their parties,[102] the first populist ruler helped create an organizational wasteland and thus opened the way for later populists. In fact, after the marginalization or collapse of organized, programmatic parties, the only feasible means for winning elections was for personalistic leaders to employ quasi-direct appeals for garnering mass support. Because parties are much easier to destroy than to rebuild, populism as a political strategy took hold, even if populist leaders achieved little political success and limped along with low popularity; after all, there was no realistic alternative.

This fate befell Peru after Fujimori's downfall in 2000. The winner of the 2001 contest was Alejandro Toledo, a neopopulist. Then Alan García, who had governed as an emblematic populist from 1985 to 1990 and facilitated Fujimori's rise in 1990, won a second term in 2006—to be followed by Ollanta Humala, yet another populist. Similarly in Slovakia, soon after the electoral defeat of Mečiar, another populist emerged with Robert Fico, who dominated the country's politics from 2006 to 2018; after Fico's forced resignation, Igor Matovič, a new personalistic leader, rose to power in 2020. Serial populism also took hold in Italy. The party collapse of the early 1990s, crucial for Berlusconi's rise, enabled the emergence of further populist groupings, such as the Five Star Movement founded by Beppe Grillo and the Northern League created by Umberto Bossi and led in recent years by Italy's most outstanding and controversial populist, Matteo Salvini.[103]

Thus, the political failure of a populist chief executive and the subsequent restoration of democracy do not reliably immunize countries against the resurgence of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Instead, crucial preconditions for the rise of populism, especially an uninstitutionalized or collapsed party system, often persist; in fact, the first populist leader deliberately dismantled remaining party organizations, creating even more room for the recurrence of populism. Once a country falls under populist leadership, therefore, it has great difficulty emerging from this predicament and re-building its party system; Brazil after the impeachment of Fernando Collor, a victory of the political establishment

[101]Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America*, 58–63, 126–128, 276.
[102]For the Peruvian case, see Tanaka, "Peru 1980–2000," 267–268, 270–274; and Carrión, "Conclusion," 306–308.
[103]Verbeek and Zaslove, "Has Populism Eroded the Quality of European Democracy?," 90–98.

that paved the way for 20 years of presidential rule by two fairly organized, nonpopulist parties, constitutes an exception.

Interestingly, however, serial populism—while weakening governability and depressing democratic quality—does not threaten the survival of democracy itself. Latter-day populists, such as Toledo, García, and Humala in Peru or Fico in Slovakia, do not squeeze liberal pluralism nearly as hard their predecessors, Fujimori and Mečiar.[104] Perhaps these subsequent leaders learn from the eventual failure of their forebears and therefore embrace greater risk aversion;[105] they do indeed refrain from aggressive confrontation and serious attempts to smother democracy. For instance, Humala in 2011 backed away from his initial plan to convoke a constituent assembly à la Hugo Chávez, which could have prepared a determined push for undemocratic power concentration, but which also risked provoking fierce controversy and all-out conflict;[106] instead, he pledged commitment to the full maintenance of liberal democracy.[107]

Even more importantly, the very ease with which successive populists win power limits their capacity to endanger democracy. After all, the devastation of the party system aggravated by the initial populist turns populism into the default option for electoral victory. Precisely because the door is wide open for personalistic plebiscitarian leadership,[108] politicians employing this political strategy can win elections under normal circumstances, in the absence of acute, severe crises. Yet without such a dramatic challenge, politicians cannot prove their miraculous capacities, boost their charismatic prowess, and win overwhelming mass support—as indicated by the dramatic drop in popularity ratings that all of Peru's serial populists, Toledo, García, and Humala, suffered soon after taking office. The very absence of crisis thus limits the clout that these easy winners can achieve, restricting their ability to do serious damage to democracy.[109]

Serial populists therefore cannot be as undemocratic as the initial outsiders, who took office under crisis conditions and therefore had the opportunity to suffocate democracy. Whereas the first populist was a

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[104]On Slovakia, see Aaron Walter, "The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Populism," *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17, no. 2 (2017): 166–183, at 176.
[105]On Fico's political learning, see Nemčok and Spáč, "The Rise and Sustainability of Party Leaders in Slovakia," 249, 256.
[106]Cynthia Arnson and Carlos de la Torre, "Conclusion: The Meaning and Future of Latin American Populism," in de la Torre and Arnson, *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, 370–372.
[107]Cynthia McClintock, "Populism in Peru," in de la Torre and Arnson, *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, 231–236.
[108]Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America*, 58–59, 276.
[109]Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy."

savior who could abuse his heroic accomplishments, subsequent leaders are default options whose comparatively easy electoral victories do not give them overwhelming clout. Because the initial leader's corrosive impact on the party system opened the door for the recurrent success of the populist strategy, serial populism tends to be more self-contained and limited in its destructive agency. Consequently, although the election of one personalistic leader after another hinders efforts to make democracy great again, it usually does not endanger the very persistence of liberal pluralism.

In sum, the political failure and dramatic downfall of a populist leader does not vaccinate a country against the return of populism. On the contrary, an initial experience makes the recurrence of populism more likely. But it is exactly this easy accession to power that diminishes the corrosive and subversive capacity of later personalistic leaders. As a result, the democracies that are quickly resurrected after the first populist's demise tend to persist, albeit in an enfeebled condition and at low levels of quality.

A peculiar case of serial populism, Argentine Peronism, has also posed only limited risks to democracy. Unusually for Latin America, this populist movement has persisted for almost eight decades.[110] Moreover, after losing power on several occasions, the resilience of its popular attachments has allowed for the repeated rise of new charismatic leaders: Carlos Menem (president, 1989–1999), Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), and now (the uncharismatic, nonpopulist) Alberto Fernández (2019–present); Fernández de Kirchner also made a partial comeback as Alberto's vice president.[111] While Menem and Fernández de Kirchner put considerable pressure on liberal democracy, they did not destroy democracy, but eventually stepped down after completing their constitutionally permitted second terms. Thus, serial populism in its different versions is not as detrimental to liberal democracy as the initial personalistic plebiscitarian leaders were, including Peronism's founder, Juan Perón.

CONCLUSION

To put the outpouring of recent concerns in perspective and to contribute to a more balanced evaluation of populism's threat to liberal democracy,

[110]Ernesto Calvo and María Victoria Murillo, "Argentina: The Persistence of Peronism," *Journal of Democracy* 23 (April 2012): 148–161, at 148.
[111]María Victoria Murillo and Rodrigo Zarazaga, "Argentina: Peronism Returns," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (April 2020): 125–136.

this article has complemented trenchant analyses of democracy's vulnerability by examining the vulnerabilities inherent in populism, which revolves around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. In their innate urge to augment their predominance and autonomy and in their persistent efforts to dismantle liberal institutions and undermine pluralistic competitiveness, populist chief executives employ a risky strategy. It is a high-wire act to attack established elites, combat the political opposition, and transform institutions, based on the uninstitutionalized and therefore fickle, shifty support of an amorphous, heterogeneous mass of followers. By inciting confrontation and polarization, populist leaders are often forced into a *fuite en avant* (flight forward) that resorts to ever more dangerous maneuvers; but sooner or later, a *salto mortale* tends to turn fatal.

The precarious nature of populism, which reflects the inherent lability of charismatic authority,[112] favors the persistence of democracy. While the boldness of personalistic leaders causes the destruction of liberal pluralism in some cases, in a larger number of instances, this congenital penchant for risk taking brings the downfall of these would-be terminators and allows democracy to survive, albeit with varying degrees of blemishes and scars. Because populist leaders can easily "die," democracy dies much less easily than analyses written during the contemporary wave of populism suggest. Fortunately, in the contest between populist leadership and liberal pluralism, the ledger clearly favors the latter; larger numbers of personalistic politicians have failed than democracies have been suffocated.[113] And where democracy did die at the hand of plebiscitarian strongmen, it has often enjoyed a quick albeit imperfect resurrection after their eventual demise. Overall, thus, populism is not nearly as dangerous for democracy as contemporary observers, worried about the precedents of Fujimori and Chávez, Orbán and Erdoğan, and stunned by Brexit and Trump's victory, have widely feared.

A realistic assessment of populism's threat is important not only for analytical reasons, but also for the proper calibration of defensive countermeasures. Excessive fear, as expressed for instance in evocations of the specter of fascism,[114] risks inducing the defenders of liberal pluralism to employ desperate tactics and strategies. But contentious "resistance," especially uncontained mass protests and civil disobedience,

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[112]Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 656.
[113]Kyle and Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy*; Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Grahn, "Democracy and Populism"; and Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy."
[114]See, for instance, Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works* (New York: Random House, 2018).

not to speak of a resort to violence, would play into the hands of populist leaders, who thrive on confrontation and deliberately stoke polarization. Democratic forces cannot defeat these bullies by getting dragged into a pitched battle. When opponents create disorder, they discredit themselves and unintentionally strengthen support for the personalistic incumbent, who can now appear as the guarantor of stability.

A balanced evaluation of the danger posed by populism suggests instead that usually, institutional strategies and electoral efforts hold much greater prospects for containing personalistic plebiscitarian assaults on liberal pluralism. Patient efforts at conventional political participation try to wear down the willful but often haphazard attacks of populist leaders, exploit their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, peel away their fickle and opportunistic support, and employ institutional mechanisms of containment. By refraining from responding in kind, adversaries avoid fanning the flames of polarization and thus make it harder for populism to recharge its batteries of anger and resentment.[115] And by trying to use all the available checks and balances, they attempt slowly to limit and drain the destructive energy of populism.

Obviously, however, this prudent strategy of damage control works the better, the stronger the institutional framework of a democracy is. In the United States, with its rigid constitution and its multiple checks and balances, for instance, "democracy trumps populism,"[116] as the upsurge of voter participation and striking Democratic success in the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 presidential contest suggests. In Italy, the institutional framework, though weaker than that in the United States, helped protect liberal pluralism against Berlusconi's machinations, despite the prior collapse of the party system. Even in Colombia with its 1991 constitution, weakened parties, and a political establishment discredited by collusion with drug traffickers, a strong and independent judiciary managed to prevent populist Uribe from concentrating excessive power and from running for a second consecutive reelection.

But there are some countries where institutions suffer great weakness because parties have collapsed[117] and democracy has been severely battered. Venezuela in the 1990s, after two coup attempts and the politicized impeachment of President Carlos Andrés Pérez, sank into this predica-

[115]For successful use of this depolarization strategy against Erdoğan in Turkey, see Michael Wuthrich and Melvyn Ingleby, "The Pushback against Populism in Turkey," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (April 2020): 24–40.
[116]Weyland and Madrid, eds., *When Democracy Trumps Populism*.
[117]Noam Lupu, "Party Brands, Partisan Erosion, and Party Breakdown," *World Politics* 66 (October 2014): 561–602.

ment. Once populist Chávez resolutely pushed for power concentration, the opposition to his authoritarian project had no ground to stand on. As the plebiscitarian assailant captured one institution after the other, the defenders of democracy could only resort to mass protests and street contention, which eventually triggered an antipopulist coup attempt and a business strike. Unfortunately, these desperate countermeasures discredited the opposition and inadvertently played into Chávez's hands.[118] But in the absence of minimally firm and independent institutions, the advocates of liberal pluralism effectively had little choice.

Yet outside such dire circumstances of utter institutional debility, opposition forces are well advised to contest personalistic leaders by employing the mechanisms of institutional checks and balances and by fomenting conventional political participation. Given the precarious nature of populist leadership and its multiple risks of failure, they have good chances of success, sooner or later. Moreover, by using and thus strengthening liberal safeguards and by mobilizing citizens for elections, these adversaries of populism foster the reassertion and revitalization of democracy. As the defeat of President Trump's reelection bid, uncommon in U.S. history, in an election with record turnout shows, this prodemocratic strategy holds great promise.

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[118]Laura Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins," *Comparative Politics* 49 (July 2017): 457–477.