

Key

“Populism will always stand in tension with democracy”.

When Hugo Chávez took power in Venezuela 20 years ago, the leftist populism he championed was supposed to save democracy. Instead, it has led to democracy's implosion in the country, marked by an attack on the independence of its Legislature.

Venezuela's fate stands as a warning: Populism is a path that, at its outset, can look and feel democratic. But, followed to its logical conclusion, it can lead to democratic backsliding or even outright authoritarianism.

Mr. Chávez, like other populist leaders, told his supporters that their problems were caused by unresponsive, undemocratic elites and institutions. A strong leader, he argued, was necessary to break through those shadowy forces and impose the will of the people. That message was popular, as were initial steps.

This is why Kurt Weyland, a University of Texas political scientist, wrote, in a 2013 academic article, “Populism will always stand in tension with democracy.”

Populist leaders like Mr. Chávez, by deriving their authority from a promise to champion popular will, “see any institutions outside their control as obstacles to be bypassed or overcome,” Professor Weyland wrote.

This reveals a contradiction between how democracy is perceived and how it actually works.

“Despite all democratic rhetoric, liberal democracy is a complex compromise of popular democracy and liberal elitism, which is therefore only partly democratic,” Mr. Mudde wrote in an academic journal in 2004.

That requires handing power to unelected institutions, which are necessary to preserve democracy but at odds with the image of pure popular will. This contradiction leaves an opening for populists to challenge those institutions.

193
But when populist leaders take authority away from institutions to "return power to the people," as such leaders often say, in practice they are consolidating this power for themselves.

This is why populists often cultivate cults of personality. Mr. Chávez, in addition to hosting a Sunday talk show, held rallies and appeared almost constantly on television. This practice is typically driven by more than ego; such leaders derive their authority not from the rules-based system that governs consolidated democracies, but from raw popular support.

This works only as long as those leaders can claim to have a unique relationship with the public that enables them to attack internal enemies — say, the judiciary or the free press— on their behalf

Populist leaders treat opponents not as adversaries in a fair and equal competition, but as profound threats. Branding rivals "enemies of the people," they seek all means to defeat and marginalize them. Turning politics into a struggle of "us against them," populists undermine pluralism and bend or trample institutional safeguards. Populist leaders also put strong pressure on independent forces in civil society and strive to control the media, especially television. Chávez set about strangling democracy and putting competitive authoritarianism in its place. He remained as president till he died of cancer on 5 March 2013.

For the first time in decades, democracy in Latin America is facing a sustained, coordinated threat. The regional trend toward democracy, which had prevailed since the late 1970s, has suffered a partial reversal. Unexpectedly, democracy is now on the defensive in parts of the region.

The current authoritarian trend in Latin America is not regionwide: Major countries such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and now Colombia seem safely consolidated as democracies; Costa Rica and Uruguay boast especially high democratic performance.

NY Times, Max Fisher & Amanda Taub

Name _____

"Populism will always stand in tension with democracy."

1. Who is Hugo Chavez?

Leftist Populist leader of Venezuela

2. What problem does Chavez say needs a strong leader?

✱ Unresponsive undemocratic Elites and Institutions

3. Why do Populist Leaders challenge Unelected Institutions?

Because it is outside their control
and an obstacle to their goal of power

4. How do Populists use the Cult of Personality?

Use it to gain popular support from the people
to gain their authority

5. How do Populist leaders treat their opponents?

Treat them as adversaries + Threats

6. How does Donald Trump use Populist tactics?

• Critical of Institutions (Congress, Media, Judges)
uses "Us against them"

7. What is the current state of Democracy in Latin America?

Parts of the
Democracy now on the defensive in ~~the~~ region
Authoritarian Rule is not regionwide anymore.