

Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism*

ROBERT S. JANSEN

University of Michigan

Sociology has long shied away from the problem of populism. This may be due to suspicion about the concept or uncertainty about how to fit populist cases into broader comparative matrices. Such caution is warranted: the existing interdisciplinary literature has been plagued by conceptual confusion and disagreement. But given the recent resurgence of populist politics in Latin America and elsewhere, sociology can no longer afford to sidestep such analytical challenges. This article moves toward a political sociology of populism by identifying past theoretical deficiencies and proposing a new, practice-based approach that is not beholden to pejorative common sense understandings. This approach conceptualizes populism as a mode of political practice—as populist mobilization. Its utility is demonstrated through an application to mid-twentieth-century Latin American politics. The article concludes by sketching an agenda for future research on populist mobilization in Latin America and beyond.

Although the demarcation of [objects of study] is not an end in itself . . . , it is of prime importance. Before we can pose questions of explanation, we must be aware of the character of the phenomena we wish to explain. (Smelser 1963:5)

The resurgence of so-called neopopulism across Latin America has breathed new life into an old analytical problem. Over the past two decades, politicians like Peru's Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and Bolivia's Evo Morales have generated legitimacy and support by mobilizing marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people. For both scholars and political commentators, the intuitive point of comparison has been with an earlier generation of populist leaders—such as Peru's Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Brazil's Getúlio Vargas, and Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón—whose charismatic styles have come to define a romantic stereotype of Latin American political culture. Given the significance and prevalence of populist politics, it is remarkable that the phenomenon has received almost no attention from sociology. To remedy this deficiency, this article presents a new theoretical approach that treats populism as a mode of political *practice*. This

*Address correspondence to: Robert S. Jansen, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, 4209 LSA Building, 500 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382. Tel.: 734-763-0078. E-mail: rsjansen@umich.edu. The writing of this article was supported by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship in Latin American Sociology and by the Michigan Society of Fellows. I would like to thank Julia Adams, Rene Almeling, Craig Calhoun, Andrew Deener, Kurtuluş Gemici, Wes Hiers, Angela Jamison, James Mahoney, Iddo Tavory, Andreas Wimmer, and especially Rogers Brubaker for their valuable feedback on previous drafts. I would also like to thank audiences at the 2007 meetings of the American Sociological Association, at a 2008 Comparative Social Analysis Seminar at UCLA, and at the 2009 Junior Theorists Symposium for their criticisms and suggestions.

approach provides the analytical tools necessary to motivate and underpin a fresh and productive research program into populist politics.

The question of populism is of critical importance to sociology. For political sociologists, populist cases can provide strategic sites for investigating a range of issues: the relationship between state and society, the role of political parties in representing and (re)producing social and political cleavages, the dynamics of leadership and charisma in political movements, and the role of cultural meanings and practices in politics and policy making. For comparative-historical sociologists, populist cases can shed light on important questions of development, state formation, and democratization. At the same time, as we move beyond mass society stereotypes of populism as atomistic and disorganized, organizational sociologists should have much to learn through the study of populist movements and parties. And the dramatic appeals of populist politicians should be of great interest to sociologists of culture and performance. Insofar as sociology fails to come to terms with populism, it will be deficient in its understanding of what has become a central feature of modern civic and political life.

The term “neopopulism” made its debut in scholarly debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a way to characterize a new breed of Latin American politicians who implemented neoliberal policies while continuing to mobilize surprising levels of popular support.¹ The term then gained colloquial currency with the turn to the left in Latin American electoral politics of the 1990s and 2000s, as figures like Chávez and Morales began formulating rhetoric and pursuing policies reminiscent of a more “classic” Latin American populism (see Cameron and Hershberg 2010). More recently, the term has been applied to right-wing politicians in Western Europe and to a range of political movements in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics (Berezin 2009; Betz 1994; Held 1996; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rydgren 2006; Taggart 2004; Učeň 2007; Weyland 1999). In the past few years, it has even come into use in depictions of contemporary U.S. politics—whether to characterize right-wing commentators like Rush Limbaugh, grassroots mobilizing by the Democratic Party (like that of John Edwards in the 2004 primaries), the persona of Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential campaign, or the post-2008 “Tea Party” movement.

But what exactly is populism? It stands alongside nationalism and fascism as notoriously difficult to conceptualize.² The term has been used to describe movements, regimes, leaders, ideologies, policies, modes of incorporation, and state structures. As Ernesto Laclau (1977:143) has noted, “few [terms] have been defined with less precision We know intuitively to what we are referring when we call a movement or an ideology populist, but we have the greatest difficulty in translating the intuition into concepts.”

The fundamental problem is that most academic discussions of populism continue to rely on folk theories. Everyday usage of the term is overly general, applying to any person, movement, or regime that makes claims by appealing to ordinary (i.e., non-elite) people. Such usage may be appropriate for journalistic purposes, but it is inadequate for social scientific analysis. For one thing, it lacks precision, as it could characterize politics in virtually any modern regime in which legitimacy is understood to ascend from “the people” rather than descend by divine or natural right

¹Such politicians include Peru’s Alan García and Alberto Fujimori, Mexico’s Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Argentina’s Carlos Menem.

²On the difficulties of conceptualizing populism, see, for instance, de la Torre (2000: 1–27), Ionescu and Gellner (1969b:1–3), and Laclau (1977:143).

(Calloun 1997:70). For another, it facilitates use of the term as a flexible epithet, to imply that the accused is corrupt, undemocratic, or cynically opportunistic.³ Finally, such flexible usage conjures grossly inaccurate explanatory metaphors, implying that populism is a *pathology* of political culture that is both *contagious* and *hereditary*. Both liberal and Marxist academic discourses fall back on these common sense understandings, and so for them “populist” remains a pejorative label. In order to make headway, it is necessary to move beyond folk theories—with their stark moral valences—and toward an analytically clearheaded theory of the phenomenon.

Unfortunately, political sociology has not offered much help. Though some of the most prominent early populism scholars were sociologists, few have engaged the topic in recent years.⁴ Most broad studies of political forms fail to incorporate those cases typically labeled “populist.”⁵ Indeed, no scholar has yet undertaken a systematic comparative-historical analysis of major populist cases—Latin American or otherwise—while there have been many such studies of revolution (Foran 2005; Goodwin 2001; Skocpol 1979), state formation (Anderson 1974; Gorski 2003; Mann 1993; Tilly 1990), democracy (Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992), and the welfare state (Esping-Anderson 1990; Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001).⁶ The most significant impediment has probably been a general suspicion of “populism” as a concept. Such caution is warranted, but it has meant that a whole set of important cases has been systematically neglected by political and comparative-historical sociology.

The challenge for sociology is to impose discipline on the concept without unduly undermining its richness. I argue that there *is* a coherence to be discovered behind populism, but that identifying it requires viewing the phenomenon from the perspective of political practice. This suggestion resonates with a broader turn to social action and practice in the contentious politics literature (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2008) and in sociology more generally (Bourdieu 1977; Joas 1996; Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986). For the purposes of this article, it means that—rather than trying to pin down flexible ideologies, pigeonhole entire regimes or movements as if they have a consistent essence, or discover the class coalitional core of a given political form—I focus on actually enacted, spatially and temporally bounded projects of *populist mobilization*. Populist mobilization is a political *means* that can be undertaken by challengers and incumbents of various stripes in pursuit of a wide range of social, political, and economic agendas. This implies that populism should no longer be reified as a movement or regime type, but rather understood as a flexible way of animating political support. Reconceptualizing populism as populist mobilization

³In the United States, “populism” has sometimes taken on a *positive* moral valence—as in the use of the term by the contemporary right. But the problems with this usage remain the same.

⁴The only exception seems to be the U.S. case, which has received a modest share of attention from political sociologists (see, e.g., Gerteis 2003, 2007; Redding 1992; Schwartz 1976; Soule 1992). The most prominent sociologists among the early populism scholars were Gino Germani and Torcuato Di Tella (see below). Mabel Berezin (2009) and Carlos de la Torre (2000) are among the few sociologists to have recently engaged the topic at a conceptual level.

⁵Perhaps the most striking example of this omission is McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s much heralded *Dynamics of Contention* (2001). Although it is a wide-ranging treatment of contentious politics, this work does not include a single populist case among its 15 core examples. Lipset’s *Political Man* (1960) is a rare exception.

⁶Collier and Collier (1991) might be seen as an exception, but this monumental work focuses on the political incorporation of organized labor, not populism *per se*. Van Niekerk (1974) deals with multiple populist cases, but his is more a work of typological schematization than of historical explanation. While a few edited volumes have set a variety of populist cases side by side, these have mostly left the comparison to the reader (Conniff 1982b, 1999b; Ionescu and Gellner 1969a; Mackinnon and Petrone 1998).

resolves old conceptual difficulties while illuminating new avenues for comparative research.

This article explores the utility of such an approach with specific reference to Latin America—the world region with which the phenomenon has been most often associated.⁷ The first part of the article assesses existing approaches to populism, identifying theoretical shortcomings and highlighting productive points of departure. The second part outlines a new theoretical approach to the problem of populism. The third demonstrates the analytical utility of this approach by applying it to the “classic” era of Latin American populism. Finally, the article concludes by sketching an agenda for future research.

EXISTING APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF POPULISM

Over the past 50 years, scholars from various disciplines have disagreed not only about how best to explain populism’s historical emergence, but more fundamentally about what it *is*. Most of what has been written has come not in the form of theoretical statements or comparative analyses, but as historical studies of individual populist cases. To the extent that these have been explicit in their definitions of populism (most have not), such definitions have varied widely. In the end, most historical studies have used the concept to do little more than label cases according to common sense understandings. Worse still, most cases end up being treated as exceptional—creating a false impression of their incomparability. This inhibits both attempts at systematic comparison and the development of cumulative knowledge. The resulting body of scholarship is thus highly fragmented, and the few attempts to theorize populism have come up short.

Nevertheless, despite this fragmentation—and at the risk of imputing more coherence to the literature than it actually enjoys—it is still possible to sketch a rough map of the scholarly terrain. Let me suggest that there have been three relatively broad “generations” of scholarly thinking about Latin American populism, subsuming five distinct theoretical approaches. The theoretical approaches have varied widely in their motivating questions, their units of analysis, their definitions of the explanandum, and their explanatory frameworks. Still, within each generation it is possible to identify fundamental similarities, especially in terms of how later scholarship has responded to previous theories. The first generation consisted of modernization and Marxist theories—both of which focused on the economic determinants of populist class coalitions. The second generation was both an ideational and an agentic corrective to these previous structuralist approaches. The third generation situated such ideational and agentic issues in the context of political structures, focusing on how the failures of democratic institutions to incorporate citizens have continued to render populist strategies useful to politicians. I will address each of these generations in turn.

⁷There are three reasons for thus circumscribing the project. First, while populism has been noted in a variety of contexts—from late-nineteenth-century Russia (Walicki 1969) and the United States (Goodwyn 1976; Hicks 1961; Hofstadter 1969; Schwartz 1976), to mid-twentieth-century Africa (Marx 1994; Saul 1969), to contemporary Europe (see citations above)—Latin America is the region in which the phenomenon has been the most widespread. Second, in terms of scholarly and popular discourse, it is the region with which the term has been most consistently associated—and it is here that the existing populism literature has largely focused. Third, Latin America is the region with which I have the most scholarly expertise. It is consistent with the division of labor among regionalists that I should let those with similar in-depth knowledge of other regions judge for themselves the utility of this approach beyond the confines of Latin America.

The first generation of populism scholarship was elaborated in the 1960s and 1970s. Propelled by currents in modernization theory and structuralist Marxism, scholars of this generation attempted to understand the social bases of support for classic populists like Perón and Vargas by focusing on the economic determinants of populist coalitions. The majority of these early populism scholars drew heavily on modernization theory (including “mass society” theories).⁸ Typically, they attempted to discover the developmental conditions responsible for producing populist coalitions between the socially mobilized—yet politically unorganized—“masses” and some elite class fraction that was in a position to take on a leadership role (Di Tella 1965, 1990:17–34). Populist *parties* were understood to be political expressions of such coalitions. At the same time, a smaller number of first-generation studies were motivated by trends in structuralist Marxism.⁹ These studies maintained much of modernization theory’s explanation for the emergence of populism, though they typically couched it in different language—often relying on Marx’s concept of “Bonapartism” (drawn from his *Eighteenth Brumaire* [1977]).

Perhaps surprisingly, the modernization and Marxist approaches had a great deal in common. They more or less agreed on the importance of defining populism in social terms, rooted in relations of production and market conditions. In this, they saw populism as specific to circumstances of peripheral development in the mid-twentieth century. While later often derided for having been functionalist, materially reductionist, or for denying the agency of populist supporters, these theories deserve renewed attention for a number of reasons. First, their close specification of the phenomenon was an improvement over broad definitions that were of little analytical utility. Second, they pointed out that populism is not just a quality of “the masses,” nor is it reducible to the characteristics of a single personality—but that it exists in the relationships between leaders and supporters. Third, their emphasis on the systematic disruptions produced by large-scale social change should not be forgotten, even as questions of agency and culture are brought to the fore.

At the same time, this structuralist generation had its weaknesses. A first limitation is that it usually focused on just two cases—Argentina and Brazil—and tended to have a hard time traveling beyond these cases. Second, it tended to take classes and social groups for granted, assuming group formation to be an unproblematic process. This assumption foreclosed the possibility that populist mobilization might *itself* play a role in constituting the social bases of support on which it relies. Third, this generation leapt directly from social conditions to political outcomes, assuming an unproblematic translation from one to the other. The important roles of consciousness, organization, and mobilization in producing these outcomes were hardly discussed. This leap also reinforced a simplistic view of “the masses” as a pool of easily manipulated individuals and contributed to an impression of politics as epiphenomenal of social dynamics. Finally, both modernization and Marxist approaches tended to identify populism as limited to a particular developmental stage. This coincided with a functionalism that saw populism as an aberration—as a breakdown in the organic workings of society at a critical moment.

⁸Classic statements of modernization and mass society theory include Deutsch (1954, 1963), Kornhauser (1959), and Lipset (1960). For examples of the modernization vein of the populism literature, see Di Tella (1965), Germani (1963, 1978), Hennessy (1969), Ionescu and Gellner (1969a), Skidmore (1979), and van Niekerk (1974).

⁹For examples of this vein of scholarship, see Grompone (1998), Klarén (1973), Quijano (1968), Spalding (1977), and Waisman (1982, 1987).

In the 1970s and 1980s, a second generation of populism scholarship emerged as a corrective to these previous structuralist efforts. In an attempt to understand why supporters followed populist leaders, it took an interpretive approach—exploring the ways in which populism consists of more than top-down manipulation and, at the same time, is not simply given by social structure.

One set of scholars attempted to do this by focusing on populist discourse; another, by highlighting the agency of populist followers. Of the two, the discursive approach has been the most prominent and influential.¹⁰ It attempted to answer a question on which the first generation remained largely silent: What is so compelling about populist discourse to those who support populist politicians? This approach focused on the production and reception—and most of all the content—of the personalities, propaganda, and speeches of populist leaders. Not surprisingly, it received its warmest reception from those sympathetic to the cultural turn. A smaller group of scholars emphasized the agentic foundations of populist support.¹¹ These “agentic-interpretive” scholars understood populism not as a class coalition or mode of discourse, but rather in terms of collective action. Responding in particular to the proposition that populism was an irrational response to economic change, these scholars attempted to discover the interests of populist followers and to assess their limited options for political action. This approach painted a picture of populist movements as empowered, agentic, rational, and as a force for change—rather than as irrational and conservative.

Both the discursive and agentic-interpretive approaches were responses—albeit quite different ones—to the previous structuralist generation’s failure to specify the steps leading from social conditions to political outcomes. Each had its own strengths. The discursive approach usefully focused attention on populist ideas, subjectivities, and culture. The agentic-interpretive approach was correct in arguing that populist participation cannot be explained away as the emotional exuberance of irrational dopes unmoored from traditional social controls.

While providing useful correctives to the earlier theories, however, neither of these new approaches provided a sufficient alternative to them. First, neither dealt adequately with the concrete material and organizational considerations necessary for explaining mobilization to action. The discursive approach assumed that ideas and subjectivities translate unproblematically into political action. But decades of work on mobilization have shown this to be an overly simplistic model. Similarly, the agentic-interpretive approach failed to go far enough in explaining the actions of populist adherents. It focused on the importance of interests and rational decision making in producing populist movements. But the social movements literature has shown that it is also necessary to consider the intervening roles of resources, organizational capacity, and opportunity (Jenkins 1983:530; Tilly 1978:55). At the same time, second-generation approaches lacked the conceptual specificity of the first generation. They subsumed too many cases, often relying only on the lowest common denominator (an invocation of “the people”) to classify a case as populist.¹² In their

¹⁰See, for example, Alexander (1973), Allahar (2001), Alvarez Junco (1987), de Ipola (1979), Green (1996), Hawkins (2009), Hurtado (1989), Laclau (1977, 2005), Leaman (1999), Navarro (1982), Wolfe (1994), and Zabaleta (1997).

¹¹See, for example, Auyero (1999), Ianni (1973, 1975), Murmis and Portantiero (1971), Spalding (1977), and Weffort (1998).

¹²Knight (1998:240) acknowledges—and in fact flaunts—this looseness, seeing it as an asset because it allows him to be inclusive of the wide and eclectic range of cases that history has agreed to call “populist.”

efforts to subsume as many cases as possible, these approaches participated in what Sartori (1970:1035) has termed “conceptual stretching,” wherein “extensional coverage tend[s] to be matched by losses in connotative precision.” The second generation thus provided a critique of the first, but not a positive alternative.

Finally, in the 1990s, a third generation reoriented the field yet again.¹³ Focusing largely on cases of “neopopulism,” this generation has taken a political view of the phenomenon. It has argued that populism is a symptom of weak democratic incorporation—that individuals follow populist leaders when they are not firmly incorporated into political life through strong and stable political parties. This generation has produced many fresh insights and infused the study of populism with a new vigor. Its most important contribution has been the decoupling of populist politics from economic policies. Another contribution has been its insistence on the central importance of political incorporation.

But despite these advances, political-institutional approaches are inadequate because they tend to neglect the social factors emphasized by first-generation scholars. Party instability is not the only route to “political availability” (although it is *one* possible route). It is conceivable that parties might be stable, but that characteristics of the population itself might change (e.g., through migration that breaks down traditional political relationships) or that the state’s infrastructural capacity to incorporate different regions might vary over time. Furthermore, established parties are not themselves incapable of operating on populist premises when it suits their requirements for political support.

In the end, the existing interdisciplinary literature has not produced an adequate approach to the problem of populism. Each generation of theory has made important contributions, but each suffers from significant weaknesses. It is thus necessary to rethink the problem.

RECONCEPTUALIZING “POPULISM” AS A MODE OF POLITICAL PRACTICE

Although past approaches to populism have increased our understanding of particular cases and of populist phenomena in general, it is necessary to consolidate their innovations while avoiding their weaknesses. This requires producing a clear and coherent theoretical approach that highlights the specificity of populist phenomena while suggesting promising directions for future research. The approach presented here is not meant to trump all others, but rather to identify a coherent set of phenomena that are amenable to comparison and likely to have patterned causes and consequences (Stinchcombe 1968:40). If it is to maximize the potential for historical explanation, the central concept needs to be circumscribed at a middle range, between the tightness of first-generation definitions and the expansiveness of those of the second.

To do this, I propose a shift away from the problematic notion of “populism” and toward the concept of *populist mobilization*. After elaborating this reconceptualization, I consider its implications and clarify the limits of the concept by discussing related phenomena that should be understood as analytically distinct.

¹³This generation of scholarship includes Castro Rea et al. (1992), Kenney (2004), de la Torre (2000), Ellner (2003), Huntington (1991), Roberts (1996), and Weyland (1996, 1998, 2000).

Defining Populist Mobilization

A fundamental problem that cuts across all three generations of the populism literature is that scholars tend to treat populism as a *thing*. This sets them searching for the true essence of populism—whether in the social origins of its leadership, its bases of support, its ideological content, its policy agenda, or its institutional character. But this way of thinking never fails to generate intense disagreements about the fundamental *nature* of populism. Ill-conceived polemics have raged for decades over “whether populism is essentially left- or right-wing, fascist or egalitarian, forward-looking and progressive or backward-looking and nostalgic” (Minogue 1969:200). One might add to this list: military or civilian, authoritarian or democratic, and rural or urban.

The best way to move beyond such debates is to shift the focus from the social content of populism and the ends toward which it is directed to the *means* by which it is done.¹⁴ This requires investigating populism as a mode of political practice—as a specific set of actions that politicians and their supporters *do*—rather than as a type of movement, party, regime, or ideology. My proposed revision in terminology—from “populism” to “populist mobilization”—is meant to capture this important shift from entity to practice.

The first step in such a reconceptualization is to understand populist mobilization as a *political project*. I define “political project” as a concerted and sustained set of political activities—a package of mobilizational and discursive practices—that maintains a degree of enduring coherence, both in terms of its rhetorical underpinnings and its ongoing enactment. By “political activities,” I mean those actions “which are likely to uphold, to change or overthrow, to hinder or promote” political authority relations (Weber 1978:55). It is worth noting that, in the modern era, such authority relations are typically centralized in the organizational apparatus of the territorial nation-state.¹⁵

What, then, makes a political project populist? I define as a project of populist mobilization any *sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people*.

“Populist mobilization” thus describes any sustained political project combining popular mobilization with populist rhetoric. In this sense, it is a compound concept that requires definitional elaboration across two domains: mobilizational and discursive. The analytical distinction between popular mobilization and populist rhetoric is important because each can be practiced independently of the other. The term “populist mobilization” should be reserved for only those political projects in which the two are copresent and mutually reinforcing.

¹⁴The distinction between means and ends (or between form and content) is not new to political sociology. It is in many ways at the core of Weber’s (1978) political sociology and of Schumpeter’s (1962) understanding of democracy. The major models of social movement mobilization and influence were designed to be neutral regarding ends, so as to be applicable to movements from across the ideological spectrum (e.g., McAdam 1999; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 1978). And the contentious politics literature’s recent interest in tactical repertoires reinforces this longstanding focus on means (McAdam et al. 2001; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1986, 2008; Traugott 1995; Walker et al. 2008). But for much of the populism literature, means and ends have become thoroughly entangled.

¹⁵By this same logic, however, it would also make sense to talk about other scales (local, transnational) insofar as the apparatus of political control operates at these levels as well. It is also important to note that, as political authority rests on a foundation of symbolic legitimacy (Bendix 1977:290–97; Loveman 2005), a political project may also be oriented toward bolstering or undercutting the *legitimacy* of the state, not just its organizational character.

Specifying the first half of this equation—popular mobilization—is relatively straightforward. Political sociology’s understanding of mobilization still follows more or less in the footsteps of Tilly (1978:69) and his identification of it as “the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life.” As Oberschall (1973:102) noted, this typically involves some “process of forming crowds, groups, associations, and organizations for the pursuit of collective goals.” This basic understanding will suffice for present purposes, with two caveats. First, it is important not to assume that mobilizing actors constitute a solidary collectivity, as the *formation* of such a collectivity is often the result—and sometimes a primary *goal*—of mobilization. Second, it is important not to assume that mobilizing actors share a fixed set of “collective goals,” as the (re)construction of interests might itself be a product of a mobilization project; and as the interests of those leading the mobilization might not be identical to those of the mobilized.¹⁶ With these caveats in mind, it is reasonable to define political mobilization as *the coordination of the political action of a set of individuals and of the material and organizational capacity for—and ideational bases of—such action.*

Popular mobilization might be thought of as a subtype of political mobilization, in that it is the mobilization of *ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action.* That is, it is the mobilization of the poor, the excluded, or others not previously mobilized, into coordinated—and often confrontational—political activity in public space.¹⁷ This might be done through the staging of marches, rallies, demonstrations, or public meetings that challenge dominant sociopolitical conventions, structures, or actors. The specific content of popular mobilizing activities in a given time and place is contingent upon a number of contextual factors, relating to the existing structures of social relations, the targets of the mobilization, the patterns of public life, and the existing repertoires for claims making. The definition elaborated here is meant to allow for such variation in the specifics of practice, while still identifying a coherent *form* of mobilization.

Popular mobilization thus defined need *not* be accompanied by populist *rhetoric.* Indeed, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Latin American history contains numerous examples of popular mobilization not motivated or justified by populist principles.¹⁸ To meet the standards of *populist mobilization* outlined above, popular mobilization must be infused with a populist rhetoric.

By “populist rhetoric,” I mean an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people. I use the term rhetoric here in its broadest sense, to imply collections of symbolic actions, styles of expression, public statements (spoken or written), definitions of the situation, and ways of elaborating ideas that broadly invoke or reinforce a populist *principle*, which reciprocally legitimates and animates political

¹⁶Recent work in political sociology has warned against taking social groups and their interests as given (Ansell 2001; Brubaker 2004; Laitin 1985). Recent scholarship on social movements (McAdam et al. 2001) has been attentive to this concern.

¹⁷See Tilly’s (1984:306) definition of “social movement” for a similar emphasis on public visibility and Gamson’s (1975:16–17) rationale for focusing on previously unmobilized supporters.

¹⁸Peru’s electoral campaigns of 1872–1874 provide just one example (Giesecke 1978; Mücke 2001). In these campaigns, popular sectors were mobilized via clientelistic ties operating through electoral clubs. Poor and illiterate Peruvians were mobilized into public marches, rallies, and mob actions. But they were not mobilized as *voters*—many were not even enfranchised. Rather, these disenfranchised Peruvians were employed as street troops to seize polling places in public plazas, and generally to manifest visible support. Their mobilization did *not* imply a valorization of common people *as* common people. Rather, it might be taken as evidence of the vulnerability of their social location.

action.¹⁹ This principle may be expressed more explicitly in some cases than in others. As Calhoun (1997:3) has noted of nationalism: “The issue is not only whether participants use a specific term [cf. Greenfeld 1992]. It is, rather, whether participants use a rhetoric, a way of speaking, a kind of language that carries with it connections to other events and actions, that enables or disables certain other ways of speaking or action, or that is recognized by others as entailing certain consequences.”

On one level, populist rhetoric posits the natural social unity and inherent virtuousness of “the people”—of the majority of ordinary members of the national community. Populist leaders may develop arguments that this “people” includes workers, the urban poor, the landed and landless peasantry, and indigenous populations, as well as professionals, the middle class, or even certain segments of the elite. In so doing, they adopt nationalist ways of speaking and framing situations (sometimes, in Latin America, alongside tropes of *indigenismo* or *mestizaje*). In characterizing such a broad swath of “popular” society, leaders downplay differences and emphasize similarities (or at least unity through functional interdependence). In this respect, populist rhetoric differs from class-based, interest group, or issue-specific rhetoric. Overall, populist rhetoric represents an attempt to forge a solidary “people” through its rhetorical invocation.²⁰

At the same time, populist rhetoric sets up its solidary national “people” as existing in antagonistic vertical relationship to some kind of anti-popular “elite” (often identified as an economic or political “oligarchy”). Typically, this elite is portrayed as having disproportionate and unjustified control over conditions affecting the rights, well-being, and progress of “the people.” Precisely which social groups get tarred with the elite brush can vary significantly from one case to another. But regardless of how this parasitic popular enemy is constructed, populist rhetoric ultimately aims at forging vertically oppositional solidarities at a national level. Such a Manichean discourse (de la Torre 2000:12–20), emphasizing the immorality of the elite, is instrumental to the rhetorical project of elevating the moral worth of—and collapsing competing distinctions within the category of—“the people.”²¹

The specific content of populist rhetoric varies historically and contextually. Differences in social structure, productive relations, and political systems—and in the salience of those social categories that result—can facilitate quite different populist rhetorics. At the same time, each country is likely to have its own unique history of political styles and symbolism, of group representations and narratives, of claims making and issue framing—all of which contribute to variation in the content of populist rhetoric. The approach presented here is meant to be flexible enough to accommodate such contextual variation while still identifying a core principle of populist legitimation.

¹⁹I do not mean an “ideology,” if that term implies an elaborate, coherently structured, and internally consistent system of ideas. Indeed, one of the first criticisms leveled against populists is typically that their ideas are *ad hoc*, contradictory, and imprecise.

²⁰The question of solidarity is of classic sociological concern. In recent decades, scholarship on class (Fantasia 1988; Przeworski 1977; Thompson 1963), on race and ethnicity (Brubaker 2004; Hobsbawm 1983; Jenkins 1997), and on political cleavages (Laitin 1985) has (re)problematized the concept, questioning the assumption that solidarity is a natural result of the relations of production, of market position, of rational decision making, or of primordial biology. Rather, solidarities are made through complex processes and are contingent events that happen and fluctuate (Brubaker 1996:18–22).

²¹It is too simplistic to say that populist rhetoric combines a logic of horizontal inclusion with one of vertical exclusion, since it typically maintains some measure of horizontal exclusion (against “outsider” ethnic groups, for example) and vertical inclusion (of particular elite segments seen as allied to the cause of “the people”). But it is safe to say that the vertical, “people-elite” opposition is portrayed as the *primary* categorical opposition in a social field otherwise characterized by functional interdependence. True virtue and authority rest with “the people,” while elites exercise illegitimate authority.

Just as popular mobilization need not be infused with populist rhetoric, populist rhetoric is not always instantiated in a mobilization project. Latin American history provides numerous examples of the elaboration of populist rhetoric in the absence of active popular mobilization.²² Again, what matters here is the confluence of the two.

Populist mobilization projects infuse popular mobilization with populist rhetoric. The populist rhetoric animates, specifies the significance of, and justifies the popular mobilization; and the popular mobilization instantiates the populist rhetoric in a popular political project. While the two planes remain analytically distinct, there is a clear historical correlation. With a sort of elective affinity, each suggests itself to the other from the perspective of those undertaking political projects, given adequate opportunities for each. For reasons already noted, one populist mobilization project may look quite different from another pursued in a different time and place. The conceptualization elaborated here is meant to provide a consistent basis for identifying what these projects share in common.

Implications

By treating populism as a mode of political practice, the above conceptualization has several advantages over previous approaches. First, it transcends some of the limitations of first-generation scholarship by abandoning the assumption that populism is necessarily tied to a particular developmental stage. Populist mobilization does not reduce to the social content of “populist coalitions,” nor is it linked by necessity to a particular set of economic conditions or policies. Second, this conceptualization is less expansive than those of second-generation approaches, providing better analytical leverage. As noted above, a set of ideas can float about in the ether of political discourse without ever being instantiated in an actual mobilization project. Third, it moves beyond the political institutional focus of third-generation scholarship by understanding populist politics as more than a matter of incorporation.

Furthermore, describing populist mobilization as a political *project* is significant for a number of reasons. First, it forces us to specify the actors and organizations involved. Suggesting that populist politics is about *leaders mobilizing supporters* undermines organicist assumptions that populist movements embody some natural confluence of the interests of—or symbiotic relationships between—prepolitical social groups.²³ Indeed, populist mobilization can be a reasonable strategy for both incumbents (state leaders) and challengers (leaders of political movements seeking to gain control of the state). Second, understanding populist mobilization as a project highlights the spatial limitations of populist politics. States maintain variable degrees of infrastructural power within their own territories (Mann 1984) and social formations often vary geographically. For these reasons and others, populist mobilization is often spatially circumscribed, targeting only certain geographical areas (regions, provinces, cities, or neighborhoods). Third, understanding populist mobilization as a project emphasizes its temporal boundedness and variability. Populist mobilization is undertaken at specific historical moments, is sustained for limited durations,

²²To take just one example, Peru's Haya de la Torre developed his populist rhetoric through correspondence and public writing over the course of nearly 10 years in exile before engaging in any kind of sustained, large-scale popular mobilizing.

²³While populist leaders often utilize organicist *rhetoric* (Stepan 1978:3–45; van Niekerk 1974:29), this does not mean that their movements *are* organic.

and is subject to fluctuation in its character and intensity over time. Approaches to populism based on temporally static (or conventionally periodized) typologies fail to account for the fact that putatively populist regimes and movements vary significantly over time in their propensity to enact populist mobilization projects.²⁴ Defining populist mobilization as a project thus identifies a set of practices that are leader-driven and organizationally maintained, while remaining spatially and temporally bounded.²⁵

Given the specificity of this conceptualization, it is worth noting a few phenomena often conflated with populism that it *excludes*. First, populist mobilization is distinct from the rise of mass democratic politics—although the two have often occurred together in history. It is possible to conceive of mass politics developing without the enactment of populist mobilization.²⁶ And it is possible to conceive of populist mobilization without mass democratic politics.²⁷

Second, populist mobilization is not identical with the rise of leftist, reformist, or “popular” movements aimed at helping impoverished social sectors. This applies to the reformism of the mid-twentieth century—in which many Latin American countries saw proposals for land reform, pursued nationalist economic policies, and paid lip service to the importance of social programs—as well as the coming to power of leftist parties in the last decade of the twentieth century. Shifts to the left, or to reformism, are important to explain in their own right and should not be confused with populist mobilization *per se*—even if reformers sometimes rely on populist mobilization to build support.

Third and fourth, populist mobilization should not be confused with either traditional clientelism or with *caudillismo*. Both modes of political control are deeply entrenched in the political history of Latin America and so form part of the cultural repertoires of Latin American politicians. But both have also been too easily conflated with populism. Scholars who see populism as an incorporation project sometimes confuse it with clientelism. But populist mobilization is not simply a mode of incorporation; and reducing populist mobilization to clientelism obscures the fact that it often results from the *breakdown* of old clientelistic systems. At the same time, scholars who see populism as a mode of personalistic and charismatic politics often take it to be synonymous with *caudillismo*. But again, populist mobilization as I have defined it involves much more than charisma—even if it is undeniable that the modern populist often cloaks himself in the historical mantle of the virile *caudillo*. As with mass politics and leftist reformism, clientelism and *caudillismo* are important to explain in their own right. While often practiced in concert with populist mobilization, they should be kept analytically distinct.

The drawing of such careful distinctions is not a frivolous exercise in political labeling. Rather, it is a necessary first step toward providing a sound basis for comparative research. The following section demonstrates this analytical utility by applying the approach outlined here to mid-twentieth-century Latin American politics.

²⁴For example, Lipset’s (1960:127–79) labeling of Peronism as a “leftist-fascist” regime type inadvertently gives the impression that Perón’s tenure was relatively undifferentiated, when in fact—as will be discussed later—Perón only practiced populist mobilization at specific points in time.

²⁵This carries the important implication that “populist” may not be an appropriate designation for entire regimes or movements for extended periods of time.

²⁶The most obvious example is the rise of mass politics in Western Europe, where strong labor parties incorporated and disciplined more potentially radical action (Przeworski 1995:54).

²⁷The massive populist mobilization of workers and urban squatters that Peru’s General Juan Velasco began in 1968, for example, was conducted through his military government—in a distinctly undemocratic context (Stepan 1978).

APPLICATION: THE “CLASSIC” ERA OF LATIN AMERICAN POPULISM

The mid-twentieth-century era of “classic” Latin American populism provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the new theoretical approach because it has thus far been the primary referent of most populism scholarship. Recasting populism as “populist mobilization” clarifies the political terrain of this era, while suggesting new and promising avenues for future research. It does so in three respects. First, it brings more analytical precision to the three cases that have been studied most extensively. Second, it shores up meaningful similarities between these high-profile cases and others of the same era that have been almost entirely ignored. Third, it specifies *differences* between this set of positive cases and a wide range of negative cases.

High-Profile Cases: Theory Provides Analytical Precision

Populist mobilization played a critical role in the twentieth-century political histories of most Latin American countries. Indeed, by the definition outlined above, 8 of the 11 Latin American countries considered here experienced at least one episode of populist mobilization before 1955: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.²⁸ But just *three* of these countries have drawn a disproportionate share of the scholarly attention. For these high-profile cases, the conceptualization offered here provides greater analytical precision than past approaches.

The existing populism literature on the “classic” period elevates the cases of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico.²⁹ In Argentina, the focus has been on President and General Juan Domingo Perón, who mobilized workers into a personalistic party in support of his own government. In Brazil, President and dictator Getúlio Vargas—widely known for his populist rhetoric—has garnered the lion’s share of scholarly attention. In Mexico, the emphasis has been broadly on the Mexican Revolution and the postrevolutionary period, in which peasants and workers were mobilized into a corporatist state party. But Perón held the presidency in Argentina from 1946 through 1955, and then again from 1973 to 1974; Vargas was in office from 1930 to 1945 and from 1951 to 1954; and the period treated as populist in the Mexican case spans roughly 23 years, from 1917 to 1940. Clearly, the analytical instrument remains blunt.

Reconceptualizing populism as populist mobilization clarifies the spatial and temporal boundaries of these early populist episodes. Measured against the standard outlined above, it becomes clear that Perón began his project of populist mobilization in Buenos Aires as early as 1943—even before securing the presidency—and that this project had wound down by 1949. It becomes apparent that Vargas—although in office by 1930—did not initiate an active populist mobilization project until 1943 (in

²⁸This discussion excludes Central America, the Caribbean, and the Guianas. For economy of presentation, it is also limited to the *first* episode of populist mobilization in each country. The article does not set out to construct a comprehensive catalog of all “classic” populist cases, but only to start the ball rolling in that direction, while using select cases to demonstrate the utility of the new theoretical approach to populism that is the focus of this article.

²⁹The first and second generations of populism scholarship were developed largely with reference to these cases and the overwhelming majority of historical studies have focused on these as well. On the Argentine case, see Blanksten (1953), Di Tella (1990), Germani (1978), Horowitz (1999), James (1988), Spektorowski (1994), Tamarin (1982), and van Niekerk (1974:135–77). On the Brazilian case, see Conniff (1981, 1982a, 1999a), French (1989, 1994), Levine (1970), and Wolfe (1994). On the Mexican case, see Aguila M. and Enríquez Perea (1996), Basurto (1999), Cornelius (1973), Knight (1990, 1994), Stevens (1977), and vom Hau (2007:165–227).

anticipation of a postwar democratic opening) and that he sustained this project for just two years. And in the case of Mexico, a practice-based theory makes it possible to specify those periods of the Revolution and revolutionary consolidation that were marked by active populist mobilization (in particular, the 1934–1940 period in which Lázaro Cárdenas led a concerted populist project).

Because regimes and movements can move into and out of populist politics, it is not adequate to ask simply whether they *were* or were *not* populist in some essential sense. Rather, it is necessary to ask *where* and *when* they did and did not *actively pursue* populist mobilization. Discussing just one of these cases in more detail should suffice to illustrate this point.

Perón is without a doubt Latin America's most widely recognized populist, past or present. But while others have treated "Peronismo" as a unitary (if vague) phenomenon, it is useful to develop a better specification of when and how Perón actually relied most heavily on populist mobilization. I suggest that Perón's first mobilizational period (and Argentina's first large-scale populist episode) ran from 1943 through 1949—from three years *before* Perón became president through three years *before the close* of his first presidential term. In 1943, then-Colonel Perón participated in a *coup d'état* and was subsequently appointed Secretary of Labor by the new military government. He initiated his first populist mobilization project at this early moment, forging ties with unions and mobilizing workers by encouraging strikes, into which he could then intervene on the side of labor (Skidmore and Smith 1992:88). This mobilization provoked opposition from other members of the government, who in 1945 had Perón arrested and removed from his post. But by this time, the die was cast. Perón had developed enough support among urban workers that mass demonstrations forced his release from prison and catapulted him to victory in the 1946 presidential election. Supported by steady economic growth between 1943 and 1948, Perón made efforts to build a multiclass alliance, but workers always formed his "principal electoral base as well as a massive counterweight against his inconsistent military, industrial, and middle-class supporters" (Tamarin 1982:40). Argentina's first populist episode effectively ended in 1949, when postwar economic crises disrupted Perón's ability to pursue populist mobilization and led him to rely increasingly on authoritarian measures for maintaining political control. What matters most in all of this is not the question of whether Perón was or was not *himself* a populist, but the fact that he *enacted* populist mobilization consistently between 1943 and 1949. Such a periodization does not map onto Perón's presidential tenure and is obscured by previous approaches to populism, but it captures more precisely the moment of Argentine history that should be compared with other populist episodes (both high- and low-profile).

Low-Profile Cases: Theory Identifies Overlooked Similarities

At the same time that the shift from populism to populist mobilization makes it possible to specify the three most high-profile classic cases with more precision, it also provides clear criteria for the inclusion of other *neglected* cases in the comparative matrix. As noted above, five other Latin American countries (of the 11 under consideration) *also* experienced at least one episode of populist mobilization in the classic era. That is, despite the emphases of the existing literature, there have been a handful of other important moments in which quite similar populist projects made an early appearance. These overlooked populist episodes may have been shorter-lived or less consequential than those of Perón, Vargas, and Cárdenas, but a theory of

populist mobilization suggests that they share many meaningful similarities with such high-profile cases. For illustrative purposes, I will provide a brief narrative of just one of these.

There has been remarkably little scholarship on Bolivian political history. Its revolution of 1952 is probably the least studied in Latin American history and the country's first episode of populist mobilization is even less remembered.³⁰ This episode began early in 1944, after Colonel Gualberto Villarroel came to power in a *coup d'état* that was supported by a relatively new political party—the *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario* (MNR). Facing opposition from the left and the right, as well as pressure from the United States, Villarroel and the MNR undertook a populist project to mobilize new bases of support (Gotkowitz 2007:164; Whitehead 1991:530). The Villarroel-MNR project appealed to mineworkers, urban laborers, informal sector workers (especially market women), and indigenous peasants. This appeal was made through a rhetoric that valorized the ideal of a mestizo nation allied against an “anti-patria” of mining interests, hacienda owners, and others viewed as the domestic allies of foreign imperialists (Gotkowitz 2007:164–91; Whitehead 1991:533). In the run-up to congressional elections to be held in June 1944, Villarroel and the MNR initiated an extensive campaign of mobilization and organization, forming a powerful mineworkers' union, holding a national Indigenous Congress, and staging importantly symbolic public events and commemorations.³¹ This first populist episode came to an abrupt end on July 20, 1946, when the *Frente Democrático Anti-Fascista*—an umbrella organization formed to unite the opposition—staged a violent revolution in which “a street mob burst into the presidential palace, and the corpse of Villarroel was hung from a lamp post in the Plaza Murillo, in apparent imitation of the death of Mussolini” (Whitehead 1991:534–35).

Similar stories could be told for each of the other neglected cases. A theory of populist mobilization would acknowledge, for example, the competitive mobilization projects of Peru's Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and Luis M. Sánchez Cerro, in the run-up to the 1931 presidential election, as constituting that country's first populist episode. It would recognize the second presidential campaign of José María Velasco Ibarra (1939–1940) as Ecuador's first populist episode. Rómulo Betancourt's 1945–1948 mobilization and organization of peasants, farmers, and youth—while attacking the oligarchy with “extremely aggressive” speeches (Ellner 1999:129)—would enter into comparative discussions as Venezuela's first populist episode. And due attention would be paid to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's mobilization projects of 1944 through 1948 as representing Colombia's first populist episode. While each of these has been the subject of at least a few historical studies, they have almost never been incorporated into theoretical or comparative discussions of populist politics.³² The continuation of such neglect threatens to impede our understanding of Latin American populism because all five cases share important practical similarities with the high-profile cases.

³⁰On the Bolivian case, see Gotkowitz (2007) and Whitehead (1991).

³¹For a detailed analysis of the Indigenous Congress, see Gotkowitz (2007:192–232). On Villarroel's massive effort at commemorating the heroic actions of *mestiza* market women in Bolivia's war for independence, see Gotkowitz (2000).

³²On the Peruvian case, see Klarén (1973) and Stein (1980). On the Ecuadorian case, see Arizaga Vega (1985), Cárdenas Reyes (1991), de la Torre (1993, 2000:28–79), Maiguashca and North (1991), and Sosa-Buchholz (1999). On the Venezuelan case, see Davila (2000) and Ellner (1982, 1999). On the Colombian case, see Braun (1985), Dix (1978), and Green (1996).

Negative Cases: Theory Specifies Previously Unappreciated Differences

Too often, popular views of Latin American politics suffer from the impression that populism is *endemic* in the region—that it is simply part of the political culture. But populist mobilization has only been pursued at specific times and in particular places. Thus, at the same time that reconceptualizing populism as populist mobilization brings greater analytical precision to the high-profile cases and incorporates various neglected cases into the comparative fold, it usefully delimits the universe of cases. It makes it possible to specify what populist mobilization is *not*, excluding cases too casually lumped together under the pejorative folk label “populist.” This identification of meaningful difference is just as important as the discovery of unappreciated similarity for clarifying the political terrain and establishing new lines of research.

Populist mobilization has not been a constant feature of Latin American political history, but rather is an innovation of the twentieth century. Before this point, Latin American politics was defined by the looming presence of the military in political life, by conflicts between *caudillo* strongmen competing for the spoils of office, by liberal-conservative, rural-urban, and regional rivalries, and—with the rise of electoral politics and political parties—by various, often corrupt, forms of elite control over electoral outcomes. But it is only when we conflate populism with authoritarianism, *caudillismo*, clientelism, corruption—or, somewhat differently, with any *anti-status-quo* movement—that the phenomenon seems to reach deep back into the nineteenth century. Providing the means to avoid such conflation is one of the advantages of the present theory.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, new social and political conditions began to provide creative politicians with glimpses of novel opportunities for securing and maintaining power. Around this time, some countries experienced short-lived episodes of what might be thought of as “proto-populist” mobilization. But it was not until Peru’s 1931 election that the region experienced its first sustained, large-scale populist episode. While it is important to understand the ways in which populist mobilization was foreshadowed by more limited mobilization projects before 1931, a practice-oriented theory provides clear standards for excluding such previous political activities.

But even after 1931, populist mobilization was far from endemic in Latin America. While by the definition proposed here most Latin American countries *had* experienced a populist episode by 1955, nonpopulist phases still significantly outnumbered examples of concerted populist mobilization—even in those countries. More interesting still, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay experienced *no* episodes of populist mobilization in the classic era. Remarkably, the populism literature has paid almost no attention to these anomalous cases—likely because it lacks the criteria for identifying them as such. But any theory claiming to explain populist mobilization must also be able to account for negative cases. A practice-based approach thus circumscribes the phenomenon in a way that is both intellectually provocative and theoretically necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

Sociology has long been insulated from populism studies. By now it should be evident that the fragmented and theoretically impoverished populism literature has much to gain by drawing on recent innovations in political sociology. But sociology similarly

stands to benefit by taking populist cases seriously. The recent return to populist politics in Latin America and elsewhere serves as a reminder that populism is not a relic of an earlier developmental stage, but rather an important and enduring feature of the modern civic and political landscape. For sociology, this presents a serious challenge—but also a tremendous opportunity for theoretical development and for increased social and political relevance.

This article has engaged with Latin America's *classic* populist era to demonstrate the analytical utility of its practice-based approach, but the approach is meant to be equally applicable to *contemporary* Latin American politics. The fact that the neopopulists of the 1990s largely pursued neoliberal policies, while others have lately been more progressive, ceases to be problematic when populism is viewed as a flexible practice. Similarly, that not all politicians who might be thought of as representing Latin America's broader turn to the left have pursued populist mobilization is also easily understood when means are differentiated from ends. The theory outlined here facilitates such distinctions and makes it possible to move forward with a clearer sense of the political reality. While this article has remained agnostic regarding the applicability of its framework beyond Latin America, it provides a baseline for the design of rigorous comparative studies aimed at addressing this important question.

But whether focused on Latin America or other regions—and whether endeavoring to explain politics in the past or present—reconceptualizing populism as populist mobilization emancipates scholars from old stalemates and motivates new research questions. Such questions include: (1) When, where, and why have politicians come to pursue populist mobilization as a political strategy? That is, what conditions have encouraged and shaped the emergence of this repertoire of political practices? (2) What do populist mobilization projects look like in their practical details and how are the dynamics of populist mobilizing different from or similar to those of other modes of political activity? (3) Under what conditions does populist mobilization succeed in securing the degree, type, and duration of political support that its practitioners mean to achieve? (4) What are the consequences (both intended and unintended) of the practice of populist mobilization for other domains of social and political life? Systematic and rigorous attempts to answer such questions would facilitate a long awaited coming to terms with the problem of populism.

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