



2025 APSA Annual Meeting & Exhibition
11-14 September / Vancouver, BC, Canada

Reimagining Politics, Power, and Peoplehood in Crisis Times

POPULISM, “THE PEOPLE,” AND DEMOCRACY: INSIGHTS FROM THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Full Paper Panel, September 11, 8:00am - 9:30am (PDT)

Session Description

Populist leaders, movements, and parties mobilize mass support around claims to empower a sovereign “people” who have been abandoned or betrayed by a nefarious elite. Theories of populism, however, have struggled to identify who, exactly, constitutes “the people” and how—or whether—the “people” are constructed as a collective democratic subject, or simply invoked symbolically by a dominant leader as an instrument of personalist or autocratic authority. These questions are integral to contemporary debates about whether populism is a threat or a potential corrective to democracy and its ailments, and they strike at the heart of APSA’s 2025 conference theme on “Reimagining Politics, Power, and Peoplehood in Crisis Times.”

The Latin American experience provides a diverse array of populist movements to nourish theoretical and empirical scholarship on these questions, and to explore their implications for understanding populism’s complex relationship to political democracy. Indeed, some of the most important and influential scholarship on this topic has been produced by scholars specializing in Latin American politics, from the mid-20th century rise of state-centric “national populism” to the pro-market “neopopulism” of the late 20th century and the more recent proliferation of both left-wing and right-wing populisms with linkages to very different types of civic networks. Nevertheless, the often-competing insights from this Latin American scholarship on political leadership and popular subjectivity have rarely been brought into dialogue with each other and assessed in a systematic manner. This panel is designed to stimulate such a dialogue, and to place it at the center of broader theoretical debates about populism as a response to crises of democratic representation.

Carlos de la Torre (University of Florida): Reimagining Populism and the People: Lessons from Latin America

Scholars working on Latin America have theorized populism since the 1950s when Gino Germani used the category national populism to differentiate Peronism from fascism. Unfortunately, many scholars in the global north do not pay attention to the rich Latin Americanist literature and focus only on comparing Europe with Trump. This paper revisits the controversies around Germani's interpretation focusing on the conditions under which populism emerged, the linkages between leader and followers, and its relationship with authoritarianism and democratization.

Paula Diehl (University of Kiel): Populism and the Tipping Point of Democracy

Populism's ambivalent relationship to democracy is well-known. On the one hand, it claims for more popular power and equality, on the other, it promotes the direct relationship to the leader, twisting democratic representation. Populism promises to transform the crowd into a political subject in order to directly get its rights and exercise power. This is the process described by Ernesto Laclau when the populist discourse articulation creates an empty signifier, the people. Here too, an ambivalent moment vis à vis of democracy takes place. This is the case when the demands for popular sovereignty turn into destruction of the political institutions. Such a destruction bears the risk of totalitarianism and terror. Glimpses of this moment could be observed in the attempt of the coup d'état in Brazil and in the invasion of the Capitol in Washington. "This is our house" is a democratic claim that promises a revolutionary take-over of political institutions, but can easily turn into the legitimization of anti-democratic projects in name of the people. I propose to analyze this moment as a chance and as a tipping point of democracy by taking two dimensions into consideration: a) as inherent democratic potential and risk of the populist promise and b) as emergent moment of populist performances of contestation and insurrection.

Lisa Zanotti (Diego Portales University): The Authoritarian Feedback Loop: Rethinking the Populist Radical Right Beyond Nativism

The Populist Radical Right (PRR) has traditionally been conceptualized as comprising two core ideological components: nativism and authoritarianism. However, this definition has largely been based on a limited number of cases from Western Europe, overlooking the PRR's emergence in other regions of the world. This paper undertakes an inductive-deductive approach to reconceptualize the PRR by incorporating insights from these diverse contexts.

Building on the literature in political psychology, this study seeks to advance a more nuanced framework for understanding the PRR, placing authoritarianism at its core—not as an ideology, but as a dynamic predisposition that becomes activated in response to perceived "normative threats." These threats, which challenge societal cohesion and stability, trigger exclusionary attitudes toward out-groups—those perceived as deviating from societal norms. While in Europe immigrants are often framed as the primary out-group, in other regions, such as Latin America, feminists,

LGBTQ+ communities, and social movements are more frequently seen as threats to traditional hierarchies and moral frameworks.

This study argues that the intersection of authoritarian predispositions with ideological currents—such as nationalism, anti-feminism, and anti-communism—provides the narrative tools to frame these out-groups as existential dangers. By portraying them as threats to societal stability, cultural identity, and moral cohesion, these ideologies not only justify exclusion but also reinforce authoritarian tendencies. This feedback loop underscores the adaptability of the PRR across contexts and highlights authoritarianism's central, yet distinct, role within its broader ideological architecture.

Kenneth M. Roberts (Cornell University): The People as a Political Subject in Comparative Historical Perspective

The study of Latin American populism has long taken place in the shadow of scholarship on both European fascism and social democracy, two other, radically different alternatives to the liberal tradition. Since Latin American populism and European social democracy were both associated historically with the onset of mass politics and the political incorporation of working classes, the distinctions between them provide comparative leverage for understanding different patterns of mass political praxis, the constitution of popular political subjects, and the construction of socio-political cleavages in different developmental contexts. These distinctions—centered largely on the sociological composition and organizational/political autonomy of the historical popular subject—heavily conditioned the conceptualization and theorization of populism in Latin America, including its analytical emphasis on charismatic authority to politically construct “the people” in highly pluralistic social milieus. They also provide a unique vantage point for understanding why different varieties of populism have so often emerged as political responses to contemporary crises of democratic representation.

Comments by:

Jason Frank (Cornell University)

Kurt Weyland (University of Texas at Austin)

Link to the Annual Meeting's homepage, including programme and further information: <https://connect.apsanet.org/apsa2025/>