POLITICAL SCIENCE.

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**Charismatic Populism and the Rise of Latin American Leaders to Power.**

The political leaders in Latin America emerge and get to power on the back of personal charm and populist politics, which have become common due to the legacy of social exclusion, instability, and fundamental institutional vulnerability. These traits allow these individuals to make themselves to be the proxies of the masses, and the populist mantle paints these movements as resisting the unclean hordes of unpatriotic and corrupt elites. The use of appeals to emotions is most effective, considering that populism tends to emerge during periods of economic downturns or when people lose faith in more conventional political systems. Echoing similar concerns, once in office, these leaders often frequently remain in power through personality governance, the selective utilisation of one's base, and the weakening of democratic countervailing institutions (Levitsky & Loxton, 2021). Pursuing concentration and using anti-elite motifs they guarantee a continuous, although generally unstable, political existence.

**How and why do leaders in Latin America rise to power through charisma and populist ideals?**

**Socio-Economic Conditions as a Catalyst for Populism**

The emergence of charismatic populist leaders in Latin America is a direct consequence of the region’s inherent socio-economic volatility. Nations such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil are characterised by socioeconomic disparities, compromised political systems, and a cycle of economic downturns that lead to a loss of faith in the existing political machinery. Such a scenario allows the entry of populist leaders who wield radical promises of addressing the problems within the system. Where traditional political players are incapacitated in dealing with economic issues, such leaders, who are commonly referred to as outsiders, attract the interest of the voters by offering to be agents of change. According to Chatham House (2021), There is a void, and once again, populists fill in the gap, which allows them to address the ‘wretched’ by giving them a ‘face’ and calling them oppressed; this helps them in their power struggle for, they have people experiencing poverty in their hands.

In these situations, the populist leaders usually self-present their ascendance as a civilising quest of the “people” against a corrupt political “elite”. This polarisation serves to bracket the leaders with the discontent of the masses, adding more justification to their populist stance. The socio-economic setting in most Latin America beset with inequality and corruption would, therefore, resonate with this narrative in the hearts of voters looking for a reprieve from the incompetent rule.

**Charisma as a Political Tool**

In Latin America, charisma is one of the most significant factors that enhances the success of populist leaders because they can reach the public and avoid the established political norm. For instance, engaging their followers emotionally is one of the primary skills used by charismatic leaders in getting people to vote for them. They portray themselves as one among them and the fights that they face. The need for this personal bond is often pronounced in crises when citizens are looking for strong leadership and, more importantly, recognising that leadership. A *Journal of Democracy* article by Ramos and Ghosh (202) pointed out that leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro used social media to reach out to their followers without the need for the mediation of traditional media and pictures of polished images. This enables them to present themselves as less corrupt, far more trustworthy, and sane than the jaded smear-mongering peg politicians who rule in brooding silence.

In addition, charismatic leaders frequently tend to pose as saviours or messiahs who will succeed in finding solutions to the serious problems afflicting their countries. Their oratory is often passionate as it plays on the impatience of the audience for change. This will, in turn, assist them in appealing to wide sections of the citizenry, especially those who are ignored by politics. It is, therefore, evident that against the backdrop of extreme discontent amongst the masses, a populist leader needs to use charisma in order to create an image of self that resonates with the ordinary person.

**Consolidation of Power and Erosion of Democratic Institutions**

When in office, most charismatic populist leaders change to tactics that are used to centralise power and undermine democracy and its institutions. Such a shift is often characterised by the weakening of institutions that would otherwise act as checks and balances to the executive arm of Government. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia have used such strategies to perpetuate their stay in power and weaken institutions such as the Judiciary and the opposition political parties. The Wilson Center (2024) stresses that Chávez’s administration bent the Venezuelan Constitution in a way to assert control over the country’s executive branch, eroding the role of the judiciary and the legislature.

Besides legal changes, populist leaders stigmatise adverse political actors and the state-owned media to spread their message. The strategic control of the media in these countries aids these leaders in managing and containing the population, enabling them to consolidate power fully. The succession of the newly appointed president, Nicolás Maduro, following Chávez, indicates that these populist leaders will work harder to keep a grip on their regime even as their popularity declines. Thus, these leaders keep the military under their control and use state resources to ensure political loyalty to them, though there is an increase in domestic/International criticism.

**Causes that led to their rise and how do they maintain it**

**Socio-Economic Causes of Populist Leaders’ Rise**

The emergence of leaders with pronounced populist and charismatic tendencies in Latin America must be viewed against the backdrop of socioeconomic downturns and political unrest. Nations like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil, to mention a few, have experienced, for a long time, socio-economic problems which include injustice in the distribution of wealth, an ever-increasing rate of unemployment, and corrupt practices that have left a sizable section of the populace frustrated with the existing systems of governance. In situations where established parties fail to provide solutions to the problems, radical alternatives are proposed by populist people. As observed by Chatham House (2021), such figures often represent themselves as champions of the marginalised, making them popular among the impoverished and working classes who do not associate with the ruling elite. The rhetoric of the political class is shaped by the image of its constituents, who are the most eager for change.

**Charisma as a Tool for Maintaining Power**

Having charismatic populist leaders come into power is just the beginning, as their hold on power is bolstered by creating strong bonds with their followers and often presenting themselves as the only viable solution to the ongoing crisis. The appeal of such leaders allows them to skip needless campaign bobble on the podium and speak directly to the constituents. Leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, according to the Journal of Democracy (2021), have turned to the internet and social media to cement loyalty and present themselves as true leaders rather than in the shadows of corrupt predecessors. This skill of public connectivity, in turn, helps them retain that likability, which helps them withstand the rising dissent.

**Erosion of Democratic Institutions**

In the pursuit of power, populist figures frequently attack democratic institutions and eliminate opposition. Figures such as Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro from Venezuela have shown how charismatic populists can very easily undo the various checks and balances in place. They Engage in constitutional revisionism, aggrandise the office of the presidency, and propagandise to the public in order to shield themselves from the very public anger they may cause (Wilson Center, 2024). Such a dynamic often leads to the entrenchment of an authoritarian regime that is based on repression, propaganda, and the use of state apparatus.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of charismatic populist leaders emerging in Latin America has its origins in socio-economic challenges, political disillusionment and high levels of corruption. Leaders like Ahmadinejad in Iran, Hugo Chavez and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil come to the fore in such situations and legitimise their power base more by claiming to be the champions of the oppressed. Their magnetism is one of the outlets they use to relate directly with the electorate, and this enables them to rally support for a large area. After gaining control of the government, they cling to power by attacking democracy, silencing critics, and manipulating the information presented to the public. For this reason, populist leaders in Latin America very often develop an authoritarian style of rule, which is a continuation of their leadership, sustained through the use of various forms of power.

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