

## 5 “To hell with your corrupt institutions!”: AMLO and populism in Mexico

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### Introduction

Mexico is a particularly interesting case to study the effects of populism on unconsolidated democracies, because it straddles in some ways two quadrants of the framework laid out by the editors. The 2006 presidential campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO) featured a populist rhetorical approach and his outsider campaign left him in the opposition. The chapter focuses primarily on this experience, as the editors designed, and analyzes hypothesis 5, that “populism in opposition in unconsolidated democracies will have moderate positive effects on the quality of democracy.” However, just prior to the 2006 campaign – from 2000 to 2005 – López Obrador governed Mexico City. Holding constant the individual politician, party, and time period, we can therefore compare the impact of his populist style in different roles: governing versus opposition. Finally, López Obrador’s party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), incorporated many elements of populism in its appeals prior to the rise of López Obrador, under its previous leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. We can thus look beyond the particularities of 2006 for patterns of behaviour across time and across presidential campaigns.

While the body of the chapter explores the populist aspects of López Obrador’s campaign in greater detail, it may be useful for those not familiar with Mexico to first clarify its status as a new, unconsolidated democracy. In contrast to most other cases of Third Wave democratization in Latin America, Mexico’s transition did not involve a major constitutional break. After the formation of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1929, Mexico never experienced a military coup, and the transition took place slowly over a period of about a decade, without altering the basic constitutional framework in place since 1917. The PRI, which had hegemonic control and governed undemocratically for seventy years, continued to exist and in fact governed the majority of Mexico’s states and held large numbers of seats in the legislature even after losing the

presidency in 2000. Partly for this reason, there are many aspects of democracy in Mexico that remain incompletely reformed. The 1990s reforms which finally permitted democratic competition at the national level were not always copied at the state or municipal level.

Moreover, the 2006 election would expose the extent to which a significant percentage of the Mexican population believed that these reforms failed to establish adequate conditions for democracy – and indeed would feed their suspicions. When Andrés Manuel López Obrador lost by a mere two hundred and forty thousand votes out of more than forty-one million cast – less than one per cent – he denounced the results as fraud, mounted massive protests, and refused to accept the official winner, Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN), as the legitimate president (<http://www.ife.org.mx/documentos/RESELEC/SICEEF/principal.html>). The bulk of his political party supported him. But concern about the institutional foundations of democracy extended well beyond disappointed AMLO supporters. According to one 2008 survey sponsored by the Mexican government, sixty-two per cent of respondents openly disagreed with the statement, ‘elections in our country are clean’ ([www.encup.gob.mx](http://www.encup.gob.mx)). It thus seems fair to categorize Mexico as an unconsolidated democracy in the sense that the existing rules of democratic competition are not yet universally accepted, adhered to, and defended by all actors.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, it examines the primary case: Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s use of populist rhetoric in the 2006 presidential campaign and its effects on the quality of democracy in Mexico. The second section compares this experience to the López Obrador government in Mexico City. The third section examines the relationship between AMLO and his party, as one of the distinctive features of the Mexican case is the existence of a pre-existing party incompletely controlled by the populist leader. This feature may mediate the impact of populism on democracy. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the longer term effects of the 2006 campaign.

### 5.1 The 2006 presidential campaign: “For the Good of All – the Poor First”

The 2006 presidential campaign was notoriously ugly, polarized, and polarizing. López Obrador – or, as he liked to refer to himself, the ‘little ray of hope’ for the poor – emphasized populist themes in many of his campaign speeches and focused on inclusion of the marginalized in his platform. His campaign slogan, “For the Good of All, the Poor First,” exemplifies the populist dynamic. The goals of this section are, first, to

analyze the role that populist rhetoric played in producing a polarized campaign, despite little evidence of polarization at the mass level (Bruhn and Greene 2007). Second, it discusses whether leftist ideology led to polarization rather than populism alone. Finally, it discusses whether López Obrador's campaign had 'moderate positive effects' on democracy as hypothesized or whether on the contrary it posed a threat to democratic institutions, as some observers of the election's aftermath suggested.

When López Obrador resigned his position as mayor of Mexico City in 2005 in order to run for president, he was one of the most popular mayors in Mexico City's history, with an approval rating over eighty per cent (Murphy 2006). Despite a corruption scandal involving his chief political operative and an ultimately fruitless effort by the PAN government under President Vicente Fox to disqualify him from becoming a presidential candidate, the formal campaign started with López Obrador in possession of a commanding lead in the polls. In his own mind, he had already won. While mayor, he had worked hard to build a cross-class alliance, blending populist rhetoric and programmes targeted at the poor with public works projects to please the middle class (such as expansion of the freeway system). He even worked closely with one of Mexico's richest men, Carlos Hank González, in an ambitious plan to revitalize the city's historic centre. Running on this reputation, he strove to present a moderate public image, especially at the start of the campaign.

However, even the 'moderate' AMLO focused on the need to include marginalized Mexico, left behind in the race to adopt neoliberal reforms. This emphasis is evident in his personal electoral platform, the 'Fifty Commitments to Recover National Pride.' The first five commitments refer to the 'historic debt that we have with the indigenous communities,' the right to a pension for the elderly (a group he targeted as mayor), scholarships for poor and handicapped students, free health care for all, and an increase in the minimum wage (López Obrador 2005a: 1). Thus, before discussing macroeconomic stability, his platform focused on the needs of marginalized groups. Moreover, he referred to his future presidency as that of a 'responsible politician (...) a man of state, not the leader of a party, faction or group' (López Obrador 2005a: 6) – he would represent the entire Mexican people, not a single party. Further, in presenting his Fifty Commitments, he described the goal of his 'citizen movement' as 'a true purification of public life' (López Obrador 2005a).

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, his platform is surprisingly moderate. I coded both his platform and the platform issued by the PRD coalition<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This coalition also included the Workers' Party (PT) and Convergence.

using the methodology developed by the Comparative Manifestoes Project and based on content analysis.<sup>2</sup> According to the left-right scale developed by Budge and Robertson (1987),<sup>3</sup> the positions taken by López Obrador put him squarely in the centre of the political spectrum and substantially to the right of his own party's platform. With respect to economic issues, López Obrador's emphasis on markets over state intervention places him to the right of the PRI as well as the PRD. Government efficiency was his top priority; it ranked fourth in the PAN platform. Though he rejected NAFTA's elimination of protection for the vulnerable corn and bean sectors and opposed privatization of the electricity sector, his programme stopped well short of calling for a reversal of neoliberal reform. Furthermore, apart from a few caustic references to ex-presidents of Mexico who became inexplicably rich, his platform refrained from the Manichean opposition of corrupt elite to pure masses, as did most of his televised ads.

However, broader analysis of his campaign rhetoric reveals greater deployment of populist themes. The analysis draws on an archive of speeches and interviews collected by the Mexican NGO Lupa Ciudadana for all of the major candidates in the 2006 presidential campaign ([www.lupaciudadana.com.mx](http://www.lupaciudadana.com.mx)). Randomly selected speeches were analyzed according to a rubric containing ten topics either directly mentioned in the editors' definition of populism or implied by it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the rubric focuses on references to a morally superior people, demands for its sovereignty, denunciation of a corrupt elite, characterization of politics as a good versus evil struggle between these two groups (Manicheanism), and alignment of the candidate on the side of the people.

<sup>2</sup> Coders assign each sentence in a platform to one of fifty-six common categories, according to the sense of that sentence (or part of a sentence, if it contains multiple ideas). The data is expressed in percentage terms as the relative emphasis for each category with respect to the length of the platform. Coded sentences can be grouped according to issue areas ('domains') or summed together to create scales on specific dimensions (e.g. left-right placement). The Left-Right scale developed by Budge and Robertson (1987) on the basis of the European party platforms includes thirteen 'right emphasis' items and thirteen 'left emphasis' items from the list of categories. To enhance the comparability of the data, I obtained the full code books and training manuals from the Comparative Manifestoes Project and passed their intercoder reliability test. In the initial phases of coding, I received assistance and advice from Dr Andrea Volkens as I came across problems. I wish to thank the Comparative Manifestoes Project and Dr Volkens in particular for their generous assistance.

<sup>3</sup> The percentage of platform sentences emphasizing 'left' issues is subtracted from the percentage of platform sentences emphasizing 'right' issues; negative scores indicate positions to the left and positive scores positions to the right.

<sup>4</sup> Every fifth document listed by Lupa Ciudadana was selected: a total of eighty-one speeches, thirty-four interviews, and four 'other' documents (e.g. a public letter to Calderón). Most of the speeches were delivered in the context of campaign rallies, though a few (nine out of eighty-one) were speeches to specific audiences (e.g. business leaders).

Table 5.1. *Populist themes in the discourse of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mean number of references per document)*

	In plaza speeches	All other documents
	N = 72	N = 47
References to the good, morally superior 'people'	<b>4.82</b>	1.28
Demands for enhanced popular sovereignty	.44	.21
Identification of the candidate with 'the people'	1.54	.49
Claims to represent an 'unheard' voiceless group	.15	.04
Portrayal of the candidate's qualifications in moral terms	1.19	.26
References to existence of a corrupt elite who runs things	<b>3.61</b>	1.04
Suspicion of or rejection of established institutions	.67	.13
Need for purification and transformation of public life	2.42	.87
Support for plebiscitary decision making	0	.09
Characterization of politics in conflictual/Manichean terms	1.9	.57

The most obvious result of the analysis is a sharp and consistent divide between the kind of rhetoric employed in AMLO's contacts with mass media and the rhetoric he employed in campaign rallies to fire up his supporters. Populist discourse was reserved primarily for the latter. If one compares these plaza speeches to all other documents, there are strong and statistically significant differences between them, with plaza speeches much more likely to emphasize populist themes (see Table 5.1). Highlighted in bold, the two most common themes were appeals to 'the people' and contrasts between 'the people' as inherently good/wise versus a corrupt elite.

These populist references formed part of his main stump speech, delivered with variations in many different towns across Mexico. With respect to the central theme of the struggle between a good and honest people and a corrupt elite, for example:

What we have to do therefore is unite the people, this is the struggle of the whole people of Mexico to defend its interests, against a band that has perpetuated itself in power and has carried our country to ruin, that's how clear things are. (López Obrador 2006b)

Those at the very top (*de mero arriba*) do not want to let go of power ... they cannot be satisfied, they want to continue devouring the country, but enough already, now it's the people's turn; it is time now for the people to govern our country, for the people to benefit. (López Obrador 2006e)

Power and money will never be able [to overcome] the dignity and moral character of our people, that is what we are going to demonstrate on July 2 [election day]. (López Obrador 2006f)

We must convince those from below of the PRI and PAN because the quarrel is not with them, they are just as hopeful and just as beaten down as the majority of the people, the differences we have are with those from above and not the people from below. (López Obrador 2006d)

Or, more simply, as he stated in one of his first public speeches accepting the PRD candidacy: 'Arriba los de abajo, abajo los de arriba,' which translates, awkwardly, to, 'up with those from below, down with those on top' (López Obrador 2005c).<sup>5</sup>

With respect to the question of AMLO's critical attitude towards Mexico's existing democratic institutions, the signs are more subtle, but present, even at the start of the presidential campaign. There are many references in his stump speech to 'the corrupt and outdated institutions that have the people oppressed,' and to the need for a 'true purification of public life' (López Obrador 2005b, 2005c). Even before the election results led him to claim electoral fraud, he expressed doubts about the state of democracy in Mexico, arguing, for example, that 'we must continue to press for all of the changes that are necessary, it is necessary of course that there be democracy in the municipal governments, but it is necessary also that there should be democracy in the state governments and democracy at the federal level' (López Obrador 2006a). He said, with some truth, that:

*los de arriba*, the elitists, say that we do not respect the state of law, they keep invoking every little while the state of law, legality, the law is the law, but that is a farce, what we want is that there should be true legality in our country, that we do not just jail those who do not have the means to buy their innocence, that the law be applied equally. (López Obrador 2006b)

Moreover, as he had when campaigning for mayor of Mexico City, he promised to hold a referendum three years into his six-year term to determine whether the people felt he should stay, an extra-legal procedure that he actually carried out after he became mayor (he won easily).

López Obrador devoted the bulk of his plaza speeches not to vague rhetoric, however, but to specific programmatic pledges intended to clarify how 'the people' would benefit from his presidency, such as promises to extend a food pension to the elderly, scholarships for the poor, health care for all, subsidies for farmers left 'abandoned' by NAFTA, and more public universities so that all youth would have the chance to study. His pledges focused on helping the marginalized, those left out by neoliberal economic policies, and those historically abandoned to their fate, such as the indigenous. He spoke frequently about the importance of addressing

<sup>5</sup> He would later soften this formulation to '*arriba los de abajo, abajo los corruptos*,' to counter PAN claims that he meant to take property away from the middle class.

the needs of the poor, arguing that it was impossible for Mexico to continue to live in a 'sea of inequality (...) not just for humanitarian reasons, which would be more than sufficient (...) but [because] we will not be able to have tranquility, or public security, or governability if there continues to be so much social and economic inequality in our country' (López Obrador 2006g).

In and of themselves, promises to address social needs are not necessarily populist. To some extent, all politicians in Mexico have to concern themselves with the poor. Mexico is a deeply unequal country, and a significant proportion of the population lives in poverty. López Obrador himself complained, in response to accusations that he was a dangerous populist, that, 'the little that goes to the people they call populism, paternalism, the vast amounts they give to a few, to the bankers, that they call [economic] stimulus or rescue, to hell with that trick' (López Obrador 2005d).

However, López Obrador's promises were distinctively populist in two senses. First, he most often extended benefits as a right, rather than using means tested methods of determining who should receive benefits; *all* elderly adults, not just poor adults, should receive a government food subsidy, for example. The Mexican right (and in fact, some moderate left governments in Latin America, such as the Concertación in Chile) extended welfare benefits based on selective criteria to the most needy only. Second, López Obrador argued that he could raise all the money needed to pay for his social programmes by attacking the privileges [his words] of the elites: making the rich pay taxes instead of evading them through influence, cutting the salaries of top government officials, and eliminating corruption and nepotism.

Nevertheless, López Obrador's populism does not, by itself, explain the polarization of the 2006 campaign. He kept his wilder rhetoric for the plazas, appeared regularly on mass media in a suit and acting sensibly, made public promises that he would not bust the budget, and appealed to the middle class and 'responsible, legitimate' businessmen. So why did the campaign become so polarized? Two factors stand out. First, and most important, the PAN – not the PRD or López Obrador – decided to go negative in March 2006, a scant three months before the election, because the PAN candidate trailed badly in the polls and had made up no ground in the three months since the start of the campaign. Regardless of López Obrador's rhetoric, Calderón's campaign team was politically motivated to paint him (as they did) as a danger to Mexico.

But AMLO's populist rhetoric made it a little too easy. Footage from plaza rallies, which López Obrador did not use in his own ads, provided colourful evidence of his more fiery tendencies. In the most notorious

episode, frustrated by President Fox's open support for the PAN candidate (against Mexican electoral law), he warned him to 'stop squawking and shut up (*callate chachalaca*)' (Flores-Macias 2009: 204). The phrase referred to a noisy tropical bird, the *chachalaca*, which to the great delight of his audiences he soon started physically producing at rallies, as he repeated the allusion to Fox (and other PAN members) as *chachalacas*. Beware, the PAN ads warned: Behind the moderate mayor of Mexico City beats the heart of the radical who led protest marches and occupied oil wells in Tabasco. Voters who saw calling the president a *chachalaca* as disrespectful were more likely to switch their preference from López Obrador to Calderón over the course of the campaign (Flores-Macias 2009: 204).

The PAN's negative campaign worked, in part, because López Obrador did little or nothing in response, claiming in true populist fashion that the PRD did not have the money for slick ad campaigns (only partly true: the PRD, like all Mexican parties, receives generous public financing though it could not draw on the deep pockets of the PAN's business supporters), and that he relied on the wisdom of the people to see through the PAN's lies. This assurance became part of his stump speech: '[T]hey [the elites] want to convince the people as if the people were stupid. The people is not stupid. Stupid is he who thinks the people is stupid. The people realize everything that is happening' (López Obrador 2006h).

When López Obrador finally agreed that a change in strategy was necessary, he attacked Calderón with charges of corruption and claimed that he represented only the big money interests that controlled Mexico, repeating a populist trope. Nevertheless, after a brief spike in March, when the negative campaign began, populist themes in his discourse declined steadily through June, until the results of the election brought them back with a vengeance (see Figure 5.1).

The second reason the election became so polarized is the genuine and profound policy difference between the PAN and the PRD, especially at the elite level (Bruhn and Greene 2007). Regardless of how López Obrador framed his policies rhetorically, they would have appeared disastrous to the PAN, and vice versa. Never before had the two leading presidential candidates come from the parties on the ends of the ideological spectrum; rather, the party to beat had always been the centrist PRI. In the end, López Obrador lost because the PAN portrayed him as a radical, too risky for Mexico. But populist rhetoric did not bring this fate upon him. It merely fed the fire.

Where we really see the impact of populism is in López Obrador's reaction to his defeat. Again, *any* candidate who loses a presidential election by less than one per cent of the vote may be tempted to challenge the results, all the more so in a context like Mexico where electoral fraud

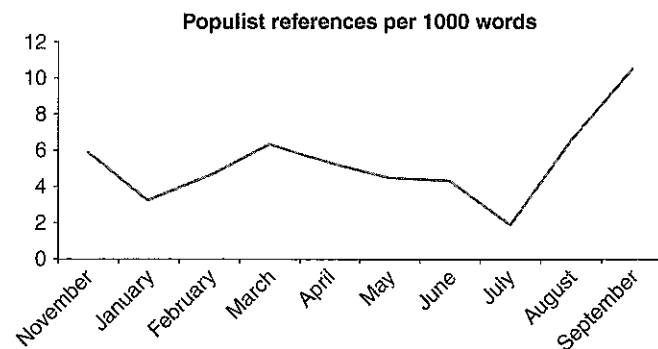


Figure 5.1. Intensity of populist discourse over time.

*Note:* Because the number and length of documents varied by month, the calculations presented here divide the total number of populist references in all of the documents dated by month by the total number of words in all documents dated in the same month. The vertical axis represents references per thousand words.

has been common. However, where Al Gore, and even Cárdenas, shrank from pushing their claims too vigorously despite legitimate questions over the validity of the results, López Obrador sought to overturn the election not on the basis of solid proof of irregularities, but on the basis that the ‘people’ *could not* have lost an election to the ‘elite.’ As he said a number of times, even before the election, ‘the victory of the right is morally impossible’ (López Obrador 2006g).<sup>6</sup> Thus, there must have been a conspiracy. His self-titled book about the 2006 election, *The Mafia Stole the Presidency from Us* (2007), suggests as much.

There were a lot of fellow conspiracy theorists within the PRD. Many of its activists started off in clandestine movements, others faced PRI repression and intimidation after 1988, and the entire party had suffered from repeated electoral frauds at the national and local levels. All of this produced scepticism about election fairness. Even before the election, PRD candidates and voters were significantly more likely than supporters of other parties to doubt that the elections would be free and fair (Bruhn and Greene 2009: 120–1; Camp 2009: 49).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing nineteenth-century Mexican president Benito Juárez, who made the comment with reference to the inevitable victory of the Mexican Liberals over the Conservatives, who governed Mexico through Emperor Maximilian and his French troops.

<sup>7</sup> I have personally witnessed party strategists in post-electoral meetings (not in 2006) admitting that their own numbers showed they had lost, but still insisting that ‘somehow’ they must have been cheated.

López Obrador’s response went beyond the usual perfunctory protests, however. In July, immediately after the election, measured calls for a recount (‘vote by vote’) were accompanied by very limited use of populist rhetoric (see Figure 5.1). After the Federal Electoral Institute officially ratified Calderón’s victory, López Obrador began to escalate both his rhetoric and his actions. In August, to put pressure on the electoral court to rule in favour of his appeal, he began a series of protests, culminating in the occupation of Mexico City’s main square (the Zócalo), and the blockage for months of Paseo de la Reforma, a major street at the heart of Mexico City’s financial district, the address of the U.S. Embassy, and the most direct route between the presidential residence and the presidential offices on the Zócalo. It was, therefore, a symbolically significant occupation and a vivid demonstration of the PRD’s ability to disrupt life in the capital city. Yet with most Mexico City residents viewing López Obrador’s claims as overblown, what would at best have been a justifiable inconvenience was seen instead as an unjustifiable nuisance.

After the electoral courts rejected the PRD’s demands for a recount, in September, came the highest level of populist rhetoric (see Figure 5.1). López Obrador joined his supporters camping out in the Zócalo. In a speech on 31 August, as his party prepared to block President Fox from delivering his state of the union address before the congress (for only the third time in 180 years), he famously told those asking him to accept Calderón’s victory, ‘to hell with your corrupt institutions’ (Aviles 2006). A few days later, he elaborated: ‘Is not the Presidency of the Republic (...) in the hands of a small group that benefits from the current economic policy that has carried the country to ruin and maintains the majority of Mexicans in poverty? These are the institutions they ask us to respect?’ Instead, he proposed a new constitutional convention, ‘so that the institutions effectively are of the people and for the people,’ denounced the ‘usurpation of the presidency,’ and called for measures to ‘rescue the Republic (...) from a small group of the privileged who have taken over institutions and hold them hostage’ so that ‘power and money do not triumph over the morality and dignity of the people, as happens today’ (Becerril and Mendez 2006).

On 20 November 2006, he accepted the ‘people’s mandate,’ given in a series of plebiscitary assemblies he led in the Zócalo, to become the ‘Legitimate President of Mexico,’ taking the oath of office, donning a presidential sash, and announcing the formation of a shadow government. He threatened to prevent Calderón from taking the oath of office and asked newly elected PRD legislators not to take their seats in the Congress. Anyone who challenged his strategy publicly, most notably

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, was vilified as a traitor (see, for example, Cruz González 2006).

In short, if López Obrador failed to create a constitutional crisis, it was not for lack of trying. The shallowness of his commitment to liberal democratic institutions (and that of many of his supporters) was plain. What mattered more than following existing rules and procedures, which they saw as deeply corrupt and flawed, was achieving a victory for the people, which meant the presidency for López Obrador.

Important, populism in the case of López Obrador in Mexico posed a threat to democracy even in opposition, or perhaps *because* he was forced to remain in opposition. However, he was not in a position to do as much harm standing outside the National Palace as he might have sitting inside it. Moreover, the threat was mitigated by two factors. First, outside the PRD, too few people believed his claims of fraud. Public rejection of his claims and tactics meant that he ultimately harmed, not democratic institutions, but the PRD. Support for the PRD fell from 29 per cent of the legislative vote in 2006 to a dismal 12.2 per cent in the 2009 midterm elections, less than in any national election since its first as a party ([www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx)). Second, he could not count on the unreserved support of his own party. The PRD prevented Calderón from taking the oath of office in front of the congress, but PRD legislators took their seats and behaved, for the most part, as responsible members of congress. The chapter will return to this point in section three.

However, López Obrador's populist campaign proved a corrective as well as a threat. Calderón's initial reaction to his narrow victory was to shift his emphasis somewhat from his campaign theme (jobs) towards López Obrador's theme: the poor first. On 6 September, shortly after the Federal Electoral Tribunal declared him president-elect, Calderón made a speech declaring that he would make poverty his number one priority (Enriquez 2006b). George Grayson, author of a biography critical of López Obrador, suggested that, 'The messianic Andrés Manuel López Obrador has done a great service to his people (...) He has put the fear of God in Mexico's pampered elite, who live well, pay relatively little in taxes, neglect the poor, and spend anemic amounts on healthcare and education for the masses' (Enriquez 2006a).

Although Calderón's war on drug cartels has attracted more attention, his administration did expand programmes serving the poor. From 2000 to 2006, under Fox, spending on one such programme, Oportunidades (Opportunities), increased by an average of 4 billion pesos per year (c. \$325 million); under Calderón, spending on the same programme increased by 4.8 billion pesos per year. Moreover, although the number of families served grew by only two hundred thousand in the first three

years of his term, the number of families served in rural areas, where poverty is concentrated in Mexico, actually decreased, while the number of families served in vote-rich urban centres increased. Calderón more than doubled spending on public health insurance (Seguro Popular). In his first three years, he more than quintupled the amount spent on the food subsidy programme (Apoyo Alimentario), from 332 million pesos in 2006 to 1.8 billion pesos in 2009. He increased federal spending on a subsidized milk programme (Leche Liconsa) and expanded programmes for the indigenous, Mexico's poorest citizens. He created a subsidy for housing and established daycare centres for working mothers. While at least some of these increases would have occurred with or without López Obrador, he certainly helped fuel political will to increase funding targeted at audiences that voted for AMLO in 2006.<sup>8</sup>

## 5.2 Populism in power: Andrés Manuel López Obrador as mayor of Mexico City

AMLO in power proved more of a corrective than a threat to democracy, though elements of both aspects of populism are again evident. There is evidence of a casual attitude towards laws and institutions, starting with a plebiscite in his third year to determine whether he should remain in office. The 'revocable mandate' was an attempt to create a direct connection between the leader and the people, at the margin of both the PRD and Mexican law (the mayor's term is six years). While in office, he held plebiscites on various issues, like whether to adopt daylight savings time or raise the price of a subway ticket. Democratic in appearance, these plebiscites nonetheless lacked the force of law and bypassed the Legislative Assembly of the Federal District (ALDF).

A second example, often pointed to by his critics, was the construction of an access road to a hospital. A prior municipal government had expropriated the land, but the owner filed suit and courts ordered construction suspended. Although he eventually complied, López Obrador initially went ahead with construction, arguing that the lawsuit amounted to extortion (the owner demanded 'exorbitant' compensation). His actions exposed him to criminal liability for defying a court order. Like all public officials in Mexico, López Obrador enjoyed immunity from prosecution for acts carried out as part of his public duties. However, President Fox requested that congress strip him of this protection, which it did in April 2005. Even had he been acquitted, the existence of pending criminal

<sup>8</sup> Spending data is taken from Calderón's *Third Informe* at [http://www.informe.gob.mx/anexo\\_estadistico/pdf/2\\_3.pdf](http://www.informe.gob.mx/anexo_estadistico/pdf/2_3.pdf).

charges would have disqualified him from running for president. López Obrador argued that the charges were politically motivated and called for demonstrations that ultimately forced the PAN to back down. Yet López Obrador's claim that legal rulings could be ignored if they were 'unjust' was troubling to many who looked for clues to how he might behave as president.

Third, even as he built a strong record of social programmes serving the poor and marginalized, he tended to create new programmes under his own direction. He personally decided which groups to benefit, rather than through public or legislative debate, and continuation of the programmes was at least implicitly conditional upon the PRD remaining in power.

Nevertheless, the programmes were popular and served many people whose needs had been neglected in the past. The milk subsidy programme reached thirty-four per cent of people in Mexico City by 2002. As of 2007, the government listed 1.3 million direct beneficiaries (Méndez and Valor 2002). He gave scholarships and food baskets to poor families. He created free public high schools (*Prepas Populares*) in fourteen of Mexico City's sixteen administrative sub-divisions – a significant outreach in a country where high school attendance is usually reserved for those who can pay for private schools.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he established a new university, the Autonomous University of the Federal District, with admission granted by lottery rather than examinations.

One of his most popular programmes was the Program of Food Assistance, a monthly coupon available to all Mexico City residents over the age of sixty-five regardless of income, and redeemable for food at any supermarket. Outreach specialists went door to door to sign up eligible residents. By 2005, the majority of Mexico City residents participated in the programme themselves or had a family member who did. Although not a large sum, the stipend was popular among the elderly, who often felt themselves a burden on their families, and it kept some older citizens from going hungry. In a 2002 poll, fifty-two per cent of all people over seventy were receiving the stipend and among this group, approval of the mayor was eighty-three per cent, versus seventy per cent overall (Méndez and Valor 2002).

Even programmes designed to benefit the middle class had some positive repercussions for the poor. The two most publicized public works projects were the construction of a second freeway level to ease traffic congestion and the revitalization of the historic downtown. One estimate suggests that these projects created over six hundred and fifty thousand

<sup>9</sup> Taken from [http://www.df.gob.mx/wb/gdf/escuelas\\_preparatorias\\_del\\_gobierno\\_del\\_distrito\\_f](http://www.df.gob.mx/wb/gdf/escuelas_preparatorias_del_gobierno_del_distrito_f) (accessed 20 July 2010).

new jobs, contributing to a growth rate in Mexico City that was twice the national average (Grayson 2006: 221).

López Obrador financed these programmes in part by borrowing, although since Mexico City budgets must be approved by the national legislature it was hardly the orgy of spending that PAN campaign ads later suggested. To lower spending, he and his senior officials took a pay cut, and he eliminated many political appointment positions. During the 2006 campaign, López Obrador claimed that he could finance new social programmes as president simply by cutting government waste. However, Mayor López Obrador also employed a third mechanism to finance social spending: re-directing money designated for less visible projects, such as maintenance of the city's aging water supply system, apparently using executive discretion (confidential interviews with city budget officials, 2006). The parallels to populist presidents who governed by executive decree are evident.

Still, on the whole López Obrador did little damage to the institutions of Mexico City. The PRD candidate for mayor in 2006 easily won election. López Obrador remained popular enough that when he endorsed a non-PRD candidate for delegation chief (head of one of Mexico City's administrative sub-divisions), he beat the PRD candidate in a delegation where the PRD had never lost. Most of the time, he followed rules and allowed institutions to function. He created programmes to address unmet needs of the poor and marginalized. Journalism flourished; indeed, López Obrador was famous for his near-daily press conferences – 1,316 of them between 31 May 2001 and 10 April 2005, missing only ninety-one days – though he typically held them at 6:15 in the morning, when he judged he had an alertness advantage over most reporters (Grayson 2006: 185). He toned down his populist rhetoric, worked with rich businessmen, and governed mostly from the centre.

Given his later behaviour, why was López Obrador such a restrained populist in power and such a radical one in opposition? The theory that he simply went crazy after he lost the election is unprovable and does not fit some of the evidence. He was quite restrained in July, as he sought to overturn the official results through legal appeals. Only when these appeals failed did he turn to the streets. In the previous twenty years, similar protest strategies had – at least at times – resulted in the resignation of questioned governors and mayors. He may simply have misjudged popular support for his claims, as he misjudged the strength of popular support prior to the election itself.

A second theory proposes that López Obrador's actions after the election reflect rational calculations. The clear distinction between his discourse in the mass media and his discourse in plazas suggests that, no

matter what he personally believed, he strategically used populist discourse. This in turn argues that he chose to restrain himself while mayor for strategic reasons. Two factors seem particularly important. First, he wanted to be president much more than he wanted to be mayor, and he knew that a radical reputation would frighten voters. One of the keys to the PRD's electoral gains after his election as party president in 1996 was a conscious effort on his part to reshape the PRD's public image as a contentious and disorderly party. So as mayor, he held himself in check (mostly). However, when he lost the presidency, he personally had little to lose by challenging the results, especially since he could not count on receiving his party's presidential nomination again in 2012. He would have to spend the next six years out of office, out of the spotlight, while potential rivals governed Mexico City or other states. Getting himself declared 'Legitimate President of Mexico' might keep him in the public eye. The fact that his party was not his personal vehicle may in this instance have encouraged more risky behaviour.

Second, he could more easily afford to restrain himself as mayor because of the strength of the PRD in the city. His party governed most of the *delegaciones* (nine of sixteen from 2000 to 2003 and thirteen of sixteen from 2003 to 2005) and had an outright majority in the Legislative Assembly in the second half of his term ([www.iedf.org.mx](http://www.iedf.org.mx)). This suggests that the electoral strength of populism, and the extent to which it controls formal institutions, may affect the extent to which populists are tempted to bypass these institutions in order to achieve their goals.

Finally, he simply could not do much damage as mayor because of the difference in scale between the powers of a mayor – even in such an important city – and the powers of a president. As mayor, López Obrador did not control macroeconomic policy, did not have unrestricted authority to contract debt, and did not have the same ability to punish political enemies that he might have had as president. His authority was at least partly checked by the federal government. Populism at a sub-national level may thus be more beneficial than populism at a national level.

### 5.3 López Obrador and the PRD: Leftist populism in Mexico

Many of the populists described in this book created their own political parties, personalistic organizations designed to provide a vehicle for the leaders' political campaigns. López Obrador, by contrast, won the nomination of an established party, nearly twenty years old at the time of his nomination. This fact would influence his actions and options as a populist leader.

The PRD has been prone to backing populists for several reasons. In the first place, its roots in the left wing of the long-ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) give it an historical connection to one of Latin America's iconic populists, Lázaro Cárdenas. The key leader in the formation of the PRD in 1989 was Lázaro's son, Cuauhtémoc, and he brought out of the PRI many people associated with the *cardenista* wing, including López Obrador. His rhetoric was so similar to his father's, analysts suggested, that 'the candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas demonstrates the contemporary power of the populist discourse, neglected by successive technocratic administrations' (Castro Rea et al. 1990: 276). The early base of the PRD was attracted to this discourse.

Second, conditions in Mexico in 1988 were ripe for the emergence of a populist leader. As Freidenberg notes, 'marginalization and socio-economic exclusion are ideal scenarios for the emergence of populism' (2007: 45). Despite a revolution, a hegemonic party that claimed to represent the demands of the working class and peasants, and thirty years of significant economic development (1940 to 1970), Mexico remained a profoundly unequal society. According to one estimate, in 1984 the richest twenty per cent of the population captured nearly half of all income, while the poorest twenty per cent got less than five per cent (Alarcón González 1994: 87). Moreover, during the 1980s the trend moved in the wrong direction. Beginning in 1981, Mexico experienced a deep economic crisis that eroded real wages and standards of living. The crisis constrained the capacity of the state to deliver material goods to its supporters or to maintain subsidies of such staples as tortillas, oil, and bread. Mexico's poor, by some accounts close to half of the population (Levy and Bruhn 2006: 13), were increasingly excluded rhetorically and materially by the ruling party, creating space for a new alternative that addressed precisely these concerns.

Finally, the new PRD faced a long-ruling hegemonic party, whose control of the political system facilitated the rhetorical division of the world into the pure masses and the corrupt political elite. To use the terms of social movement theory, populism provided an appealing master frame for understanding the problems of the contemporary political system. The PRI had been in power since its foundation in 1929, had never lost a presidential election or governor's race, never controlled less than two-thirds of the lower chamber of congress, and never lost a contested senate seat. No other party could be blamed for deficiencies in government performance.

It was, in addition, quite literally and visibly corrupt. Former presidents and other high officials amassed mysterious fortunes during their time in office. Materials purchased for use by government employees



were diverted by union leaders and sold on the black market. Police took bribes. Elections were stolen when necessary, using such blatant fraud that Mexico acquired a whole vocabulary to describe specific tactics, from the “taco” (a roll of ballots stuffed together into a ballot box) to the “pregnant urn” (a ballot box that arrived already filled with ballots). The corrupt elite was easy to identify: the PRI. The pure people were the masses who suffered under austerity and economic crisis. Hence, the populist *cardenista* discourse argued that the poor had been punished at the expense of the rich and the political elite – they had paid the costs of structural adjustment for debts that did not benefit them.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador was recruited by Cárdenas in this context to become the new party’s candidate for governor in López Obrador’s home state of Tabasco. Prior to 1988, he served as a middle rank PRI functionary in Tabasco and at the National Consumer’s Institute. His introduction to politics grew out of his work as state coordinator of the National Indigenous Institute, where he championed the cause of the poor and insisted in living in a hut similar to those of the indigenous (Grayson 2006: 34). He found *cardenismo* appealing, though he did not resign from the PRI until after the 1988 presidential election, when he agreed to run for governor.

His rise within the party was based upon Cárdenas’s patronage, his organizational success in Tabasco, and his use of protest.<sup>10</sup> When he lost his 1988 gubernatorial bid, he denounced the results as fraud and refused to negotiate the ‘people’s will.’ In the next six years he spearheaded civil resistance campaigns over various issues, including a successful and nationally publicized series of demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins at oil wells, protesting environmental damage by the national oil company PEMEX; he would use some of the payouts to help build the Tabasco PRD. In 1994, he ran again for governor, lost, and again claimed fraud. With the support of his increasingly well-organized Tabasco base, he launched a ‘March for Democracy’ from Tabasco to Mexico City, demanding that the national government overturn the official results. Again, he refused to negotiate. As he announced, ‘They think that our struggle is based on personal ambitions, that it is enough to offer us good-sized bones (...) They are wrong. Our struggle is for legality and democracy, for new elections’ (Grayson 2007: 85). The March for Democracy brought López Obrador national attention and contributed to Cárdenas’ endorsement of him as the party president in 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Tabasco was one of the few states where the PRD increased its vote over 1988, from 20 per cent in 1988 to 31.7 per cent in 1994. The 1994 results come from [www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx); the 1988 results come from IFE 1991: 11.

In these early battles López Obrador demonstrated patterns of behaviour that would later mark both his term as mayor and his 2006 presidential campaign. Populist rhetoric, opposing the corrupt politicians to the humble servant of the masses (himself), was attached to a personalistic style of leadership, confrontational and mobilizational politics, and clientelistic tactics to build the party base. His brand of populism did build party institutions in Tabasco, with one catch: He remained in control of these institutions through allies, even as he relinquished formal institutional control, mirroring the pattern at the national level with Cárdenas. Thus, party institutions did not acquire autonomy from their principal *caudillos*.

On the national level, however, López Obrador did not enjoy the same autonomy from party institutions. The PRD is a notoriously factionalized party, cobbled together from dozens of movements, parties, and proto-parties. Even Cárdenas could not control them all, and over time, the factions became increasingly institutionalized. In 2006, AMLO was at the height of his institutional control of the party. As president of the party from 1996 to 1999, then mayor of Mexico City, he placed his own clients at the top of the national leadership, including the party president in 2006, Leonel Cota Montaño. Nevertheless, his presidential campaign manager was Jesus Ortega, a rival who had just challenged (unsuccessfully) López Obrador’s preferred candidate for mayor of Mexico City in the party’s primary elections. Essentially, Ortega’s hiring was meant to appease an important party faction that López Obrador did not control.

López Obrador’s tenuous position may have encouraged him to pursue a maximalist strategy after the 2006 election.<sup>11</sup> His power could only weaken over time because PRD statutes forbid re-election of party leaders; his allies were bound to cycle out (in fact, Jesus Ortega subsequently took over as the president of the PRD). At the same time, his incomplete control of the party doomed this strategy to failure. Within Mexico City, the political machine he had built as mayor could be counted on to support his calls for demonstrations, but outside Mexico City other local party leaders and PRD legislators did not follow his lead. If he could have kept the PRD out of the 2006–9 congress, fully a quarter of the legislature would have been missing, provoking a legitimacy crisis that might have forced Calderón’s resignation. In this instance, AMLO’s relationship with the party both encouraged bad behaviour and limited its effects.

This, in turn, raises another important question. To what extent did López Obrador’s actions reflect the inclinations of any populist, and to

<sup>11</sup> I thank Kurt Weyland for this important suggestion.

what extent did they reflect his own idiosyncrasies? A brief comparison between López Obrador and the PRD's other charismatic populist leader, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, suggests that personality does matter. Like López Obrador, Cárdenas nearly won a presidential election, was president of the PRD, and was mayor of Mexico City (though only for two years). Although Cárdenas felt himself no less wronged by the official results of the 1988 presidential election than López Obrador in 2006 (and with more reason), he chose not to escalate post-electoral conflict. Of course, López Obrador had a more effective organization than Cárdenas's loose multi-party coalition in 1988, faced a more tolerant federal government (in the PAN) than Cárdenas (in the PRI), and controlled Mexico City's police force. AMLO therefore could hold protests with considerably less risk and more effectiveness.

But there are differences of temperament as well. When Cárdenas led protests, as he often did in the early years of the PRD, he took a measured approach, lining up his allies, watching his words, and often acting as a mediator/statesman rather than a rabble-rousing firebrand. He was more frequently urged to be bolder than to restrain himself, something López Obrador's aides could not claim and often lamented privately. This does not mean that López Obrador was incapable of being pragmatic, or that Cárdenas was incapable of taking an impractical stance on moral grounds; both men were comfortable with confrontations portrayed in absolute moral terms and both men were pragmatic enough to have governed Mexico City effectively. Yet the contrast suggests that the consequences of populism depend at least in part on the personal qualities of the populist leader.

In power, both men made efforts to redirect government attention to the poor, as much because of their shared ideological position as because of populism per se. Both men adopted a more restrained populist rhetoric while in office, compared to their speeches as candidates and party leaders. Cárdenas, like López Obrador, planned to run for president at the end of his mayoral term, controlled a majority of the Legislative Assembly, and had even more limited authority than López Obrador, since Mexico City was still making its own democratic transition away from decades of appointed mayors. Thus, the same factors that I argue motivated López Obrador to govern mostly institutionally were also present in the case of Cárdenas.

A more troubling similarity between the two cases is that neither man made much of an effort to create new institutional channels for popular participation, along the lines of the participatory budgeting programmes created by the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil. Social welfare policies were directed at the poor, by the government, with little popular input. Both

men were charismatic leaders who attracted loyalty through their personal characteristics, different though the two men are, and both failed to construct party institutions autonomous from their own leadership. Whether by design or accident, they preferred instead to rely on networks of personal allies. A telling point: Neither man, as a presidential candidate, allowed the party much influence over campaign decisions. In 2006, López Obrador refused even to participate in assemblies held by the PRD to debate the content of its electoral platform, reportedly on the grounds that 'that is your business, not mine' (Bruhn 2009: 171). Later, he issued a personal platform not vetted by the party.

The relationship between established political parties and populist leaders therefore seems contradictory. On the one hand, these populist leaders tended to marginalize party institutions, and did little to build new institutional mechanisms that they did not control. On the other hand, party members accepted or demanded populist rhetoric and confrontational behaviour. In the (unlikely) event that López Obrador had refused to lead protests after the 2006 election, his credibility within the PRD would have suffered. Even after the obviously disastrous effects of his strategy on the PRD vote in the 2009 midterm elections, as of 29 August 2010, a poll by the conservative newspaper *Reforma* (29 August 2010) found that sixty-one per cent of PRD supporters (*perredistas*) preferred AMLO as the party's candidate for president in 2012 compared to seventeen per cent for his main rival, the current mayor of Mexico City.

#### 5.4 Lasting effects?

At first blush, López Obrador's populist discourse seems to have left few lasting marks. Confidence in the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) remained high. According to the Survey on Political Culture and Citizen Practices (ENCUP), in 2008, the IFE ranked among the top three most respected institutions ([www.encup.gob.mx](http://www.encup.gob.mx)), together with the army and the church, with seventy-one per cent of respondents expressing 'some' or 'a lot' of confidence in the IFE. Popular ranking of the IFE on a 0–10 scale, with 10 indicating the highest opinion, was an average of 7.3 shortly before the 2009 midterm elections (Consulta Mitofsky 2010), slightly higher than the 7.1 detected by the ENCUP in 2005. Moreover, in 2005, forty-two per cent of respondents thought Mexico was a democracy. In 2008, half did.

The PRD, on the other hand, suffered a serious blow, suggesting that populist discourse did not strike a deeply responsive chord. In 2006, seventeen per cent of the population identified with the PRD. In 2007, just thirteen per cent did. In 2010, the average hovered around

ten per cent (Consulta Mitofsky, 2010). Thirty-eight per cent of the population expressed 'rejection' (*rechazo*) of the PRD, versus thirty per cent in 2006. Only nineteen per cent expressed rejection of the PRI in 2010, a remarkable recovery for the once detested ruling party (Consulta Mitofsky 2010).

Moreover, perceptions of Calderón as the legitimate president improved. One year after the election, just over fifty per cent of the population thought that Calderón won; thirty per cent thought AMLO won, and the rest did not know. By 2008, the percentage of those who thought Calderón won had increased to fifty-seven per cent. Majorities of PRI, PAN, and independent voters all thought Calderón won. Only PRD members remained convinced of their candidate's victory; ninety-two per cent said there was fraud in 2006 versus forty-one per cent of PRI supporters and thirty-one per cent of independents (Consulta Mitofsky 2008).

From a more pessimistic point of view, however, two facts stand out. First, there are sharp differences among Mexicans with respect to the 2006 election, the IFE, and democracy itself. *Perredistas* have become increasingly alienated from politics. In order to placate the PRD after the 2006 elections, the congress replaced six of the nine IFE councillors and increased the powers of the IFE to monitor and punish negative media campaigns. But the reforms did little or nothing to restore the confidence of *perredistas* in the electoral process: Eighteen per cent thought they would make things better, eighteen per cent thought they would make things worse, and the rest thought things would remain the same (Consulta Mitofsky 2007). Overall, 11.7 per cent of *perredistas* thought the 2009 elections would be very clean, compared to 37 per cent of PAN supporters. A hefty forty-two per cent of *perredistas* thought the elections would be 'not at all' clean or that there would definitely be fraud.

Second, and more alarming, independents are nearly as alienated and distrusting of political institutions as *perredistas*. Those who declared no party affiliation were as likely as *perredistas* to doubt that elections would be very clean, though a smaller percentage expected outright fraud. Overall, sixty-six per cent of those who expected the elections to be dirty said they would definitely not vote ('if elections were held today'), with plans of abstention highest among those with no party identity; *perredistas*, though the most likely of any *party identifiers* to abstain, still mostly planned to vote (Consulta Mitofsky 2007).

Simple statistical tests on the 2008 ENCUP data confirm that *perredistas* were significantly less likely than members of other parties to express confidence in the IFE, to agree that Mexico was a democracy, to believe that elections would be clean, or to think that democracy

would improve during Calderón's term.<sup>12</sup> Independents were slightly more likely to have confidence in the IFE than *perredistas* and to think that democracy would improve under Calderón, but they were actually less likely than *perredistas* to agree that elections in Mexico were clean or to classify Mexico as a democracy. Since roughly thirty per cent of Mexicans declare no party sympathy, their suspicion of democratic institutions is quite problematic.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, only one out of five citizens (twenty-one per cent) thought the 2009 elections would be very clean. The 2008 ENCUP found a similar level of distrust: Sixty-two per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement, 'elections in our country are clean' ([www.encup.gob.mx](http://www.encup.gob.mx)). Though an ample majority had at least 'some' confidence in the IFE, only a little over a third had 'a lot' of confidence in the IFE, most of them PAN supporters. Between independents and *perredistas*, forty per cent of the population has serious doubts about existing democratic institutions. While these levels do not reach the depths displayed in Peru or Venezuela as their party systems were collapsing, they may be an early warning that patience with Mexico's institutions is waning.

Lack of confidence in elections and disgust with existing political parties contributed to the formation of a movement in favour of abstention and deliberate ballot spoiling in the 2009 elections; the null vote actually came in fourth at 5.4 per cent (Ackerman 2009: 69; [www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx)). In fact, the abstention rate of fifty-five per cent, added to the null vote, meant that over sixty per cent of eligible voters did not cast a valid vote in 2009, more than in any national election since 1988.

To be sure, these troubling trends to some extent precede the 2006 election. In 2005, PRD sympathizers and independents also had significantly less confidence in the IFE than members of other parties, and were less likely to say that Mexico was a democracy. Among these two groups, however, things deteriorated after 2006. In 2005, roughly ten per cent of *perredistas* and eleven per cent of independents had little or no confidence in the IFE. In 2008, forty-two per cent of *perredistas* and thirty-three per cent of independents had little or no confidence in the IFE.<sup>14</sup> In 2005, thirty-eight per cent of independents and forty-two per

<sup>12</sup> Using bivariate comparisons of means with chi-squared tests.

<sup>13</sup> Based on data from the Mexico 2006 Panel Study, at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/mexico06/Results.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Because the question about confidence in the IFE was asked in a slightly different way in 2005, it is difficult to compare the two years directly. In 2005, respondents were asked to 'grade' the IFE on a scale of zero to ten, with zero indicating the lowest possible grade and ten indicating the highest. If answers ranging from zero to four are considered 'little or no confidence,' the result is the figure indicated.

cent of *perredistas* said that Mexico was not a democracy. In 2008, fifty per cent of both independents and *perredistas* said that Mexico was not a democracy ([www.encup.gob.mx](http://www.encup.gob.mx)). It is hard to discount the impact of the 2006 election, and López Obrador's painting of it as a conspiracy by the rich, in producing such dramatically negative opinion shifts among these specific groups.

### Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that populism can threaten the quality of democracy in opposition as well as in power. Indeed, AMLO's conspiracy theories and moral portrayal of political conflict probably did more damage to confidence in democratic institutions than he caused when he governed Mexico City. Yet in both periods, populism carried with it rewards as well as risks. The marginalized populations that AMLO sought to represent were taken into account to a greater extent, but disregard for existing laws – muted while he was mayor and amplified in opposition – was present when he governed Mexico City and again during his 2006 campaign. This argument contradicts to some extent the suggestion of hypothesis 1 that populism in government has stronger effects on democracy than populism in opposition, and the argument of hypothesis 5 that populism in opposition, even in weak democracies, should have modest positive effects.

However, the chapter also points to the relevance of three additional factors that may mediate the extent to which populist discourse poses a threat to democratic quality, whether in or out of government. First, to what extent do populists enjoy broad electoral support? During AMLO's Mexico City administration, the fact that he legally controlled many institutions (the local legislature and the *delegaciones* in particular) meant that he rarely needed to confront these institutions, although he did bypass them. More important, the *lack* of support for his claims after the 2006 election limited his ability to provoke a more serious legitimacy crisis.

Second, what legal authority does the populist enjoy? The limited powers of a mayor meant that AMLO had far fewer negative effects than he might have had as president; instead, his drive to include 'the people' as beneficiaries of government policies resulted in improved quality of life for many. Another way of asking this question is, to what extent does the populist confront an organized and powerful opposition? The fact that AMLO's party did not control the national government when he was mayor led him to face many external checks on his power.

Third, does the populist control the political party with which he or she is associated? Well-organized parties can be useful to populists, but

only if they remain thoroughly under the thumb of the populist leader. The fact that López Obrador did not fully control the PRD may have led him to engage in risky behaviour, but also limited the institutional damage this behaviour caused. In fact, since López Obrador would have challenged the results of the election even if he *had* fully controlled the PRD, the existence of an at least partially autonomous party probably helped more than it hurt. Populism is more dangerous when it is unrestrained internally, when the party is not capable of checking populist leaders within its ranks.

These mediating factors suggest, in turn, that populism is most likely to function as a corrective when it is checked either externally or internally. Embedded in all of the editors' hypotheses is an unspoken calculation of relative power between populist and non-populist actors. Populism in government is expected to have stronger effects on democracy than populism in opposition because populism in government has more power and more popular support. Populism is expected to have stronger effects in weak and unconsolidated democracies because institutions enjoy less legitimacy and are less capable of limiting the exercise of popular majoritarian sovereignty that populism explicitly endorses. In a sense, liberal democracy – founded on the principle of checks and balances and on the argument that majoritarianism must be limited – meshes best with the representative thrust of populism when populism faces limits on its power, formal or informal. This chapter suggests that other factors can check the worst tendencies of populism besides whether it governs and whether it faces strong democratic institutions: in particular, whether it develops within an established political party, and whether it faces limits based on the federalist division of authority. One could imagine, for instance, a populist president restrained by strong governors (for example, perhaps Argentina) as well as the reverse (AMLO in Mexico City checked by the national government).

However, when a populist leader enjoys broad popular support, occupies a position with significant legal authority (such as president), and controls a political party that lacks the ability to limit his/her excesses, the political system is particularly vulnerable to a final factor: the personality of the populist leader. In its comparison of Cárdenas and López Obrador, this chapter also suggests that the personality of the populist leaders matters. The thin-centred nature of populist ideology lends itself to a personalistic style of politics. To the extent that populism operates at the margin of political institutions, it may increase a country's vulnerability to the occasional populist lunatic. Yet it also makes populist politics inherently unpredictable: Populist parties are vulnerable to rapidly shifting evaluations of the populist leader. They may be particularly

prone to sudden surges and equally sudden collapses, as opposed to programmatic parties that appeal for votes based on ideological proximity to voters or on institutional ties to major social groups.

### Appendix: Elaboration of the Populist Rubric

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#### References to the good, morally superior 'people'

For example, references to *el pueblo*, versus references to *ciudadanos* – i.e. collective versus individual characterizations of the represented. Descriptions of 'the people' as inherently good/wise/morally superior.

#### Demands for enhanced popular sovereignty

For example, demands for *soberanía popular* or *la voluntad del pueblo* versus appeals to specific interest groups (unemployed, peasants, etc) or claims that "the people" (rather than a majority) approve of something

#### Identification of the candidate with 'the people'

For example, by non-verbal means (use of popular dress, idiom, etc.), claims that "I am just like you," or references by the candidate to himself as the embodiment of a mass movement or the will of the people.

#### Claims to represent an 'unheard' voiceless group

#### Portrayal of the candidate's qualifications in moral terms

For example, the candidate is qualified to be elected as the most moral candidate versus appeals on the grounds of competence or ideology

#### References to existence of a corrupt elite who runs things

This category comes from the volume's definition of populism: arguments that there is a cohesive and small group of powerful elites who oppose the people's interests; inclusion of one's opponent(s) as part of this elite.

#### Suspicion of and/or rejection of established institutions

#### Need for purification and transformation of public life

That is, rather than calling for "reforms," arguments that there is a need for a complete transformation of politics as usual, a need for a major change in the way politics operates, transfer of sovereignty from government to the people, transformation of the social order, need for purification of public life, or revolution.

#### Support for plebiscitary decision making

For example, calls for public referendums and or other plebiscitary mechanisms.

#### Characterization of politics in conflictual/Manichean terms

Especially conveyed in moralistic terms as a struggle between good (the people) and evil (the power elite).

Evaluation of the stakes of political conflict in life or death terms.

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