The nexus of populism and foreign policy: The case of Latin America

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Abstract
The term populism has recently gained visibility in the media and policy world to describe the foreign policy principles, rhetoric and strategies of political actors in the United States and some European states. Yet, populism is nothing new in Latin America where it has enjoyed a long tradition among leaders of various countries. Populism has thus far largely been treated as a national phenomenon with few international manifestations. Thus, this article adopts the concept of populism and its core components such as anti-elitism, the people, and the general will within a role theory framework to trace the foreign policy roles that populist governments play as a first step to improving our knowledge on the nexus of populism and foreign policy. We examine this framework in the context of the foreign policy of Carlos Menem of Argentina and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

Keywords
Argentina and Venezuela, populism-foreign policy, role change, roles

Introduction
Populism has recently gained appeal in describing the foreign policy principles, rhetoric and strategies of actors such as the United States under Trump, the United Kingdom in the light of Brexit and in Europe as different populist movements counter the liberal
values of the European Union (EU). However, populism is nothing new in Latin America. Presidents Perón (Argentina) and Vargas (Brazil) between the 1930s and 1950s, Menem (Argentina) and Fujimori (Peru) in the 1990s, and Morales (Bolivia), Correa (Ecuador) and Chávez (Venezuela) in the 2000s have become icons of populism. Despite this, we have little knowledge of their resulting foreign policies. Thus, we analyse the type of foreign policy populist governments advance by addressing the following two questions: What roles do populist governments conceive and play internationally? How do populists use these roles for their own political projects?

We argue that populist foreign policies come in different forms as the type of roles populist leaders play internationally depends on the thick or thin ideologies that they pair with populism. We assume populism to be a thin-centred ideology. While populism has a core (anti-elitism, pro-people and general will) that is used by the populist leader to justify the selection of roles to be played internationally, the role conceptions under populist leadership are also informed by a thick ideology, like neoliberalism or socialism, or a another thin one like nationalism. Hence, a comparison of two cases of populisms can shed light on the type of international behaviour they seek to advance and discredit the notion that there is only one type of populist foreign policy.

The international dimension of populism has only recently received academic attention. Yet, this literature tends to neglect the diversity of populist foreign policies and the different contexts in which it unfolds. In fact, the literature considers populism’s international dimension as a monolithic social phenomenon, conceived of as anti-plural, anti-democratic and anti-cosmopolitan. For instance, Donald Trump is depicted as a risk to democracy and the liberal world order. Similarly, right-wing populist movements in Europe are presented as a risk to the order cemented in the EU integration project. Recent scholarship also includes work on the nexus of populism and international politics, develops conceptual approaches to the study of populism and foreign policy and analyses the rhetoric a populist leader advances internationally. However, these contributions usually study one case and neglect the diversity of populist foreign policies. Recent studies have forgotten Latin America, with the exception of Burren’s work comparing populist and non-populist government’s foreign policies using a sophisticated model lacking theorisation, Dodson and Dorraj’s comparison of Venezuelan and Iranian populist foreign policies, and Sagarzazu and Thies’ analysis of the anti-imperialist, populist rhetoric of Hugo Chávez. This is particularly odd as this region has experienced at least three waves of populist leadership, and therefore, should provide a treasure trove of theoretical intuition and empirical evidence on populist foreign policy.

We focus on the cases of Presidents Carlos Saúl Menem (1989–1999) of Argentina and Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) of Venezuela. These cases capture the last two waves of Latin American populism, the former driven by a neoliberal leitmotiv, and the latter by the promotion of socialist ideas. We adopt a role theory framework that can be applied to other cases of populism as well. The framework considers the interaction of the national and international dimensions of populist leadership and includes the core properties of populism (anti-elitism, pro-people and the general will). At the national level, we expect populist governments to adopt additional thick or thin ideologies. At the international level, we consider the principles of autonomy and dependency and whether a leader is pro- or anti-core that are informed by the other ideologies adopted domestically.
principles are taken as the sources of foreign policy roles that a populist government may include in its role-set (the variety of roles an actor maintains).

Thus, populism does not translate automatically into a uniform type of foreign policy role, but such role-based actions include narratives of elite versus people and the general will in order to make a foreign policy more or less populist. In this sense, a non-populist foreign policy lacks the core of what constitutes populism as a thin-centred ideology. When the leader does not refer to the people in antagonistic terms against the elite, and when he does not justify the actions in terms of the general will, then the foreign policy narratives in which roles are present and embedded are not populist in nature.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it reviews the literature on populism and provides a definition of the phenomenon. Second, the article introduces the dichotomous principles that underpin foreign policy, and thus, the sources of roles for populist governments. Third, the article presents the role theory framework incorporating the dichotomous principles to generate propositions for the two cases. The article then analyses the cases of Argentina and Venezuela. Finally, the article concludes by comparing the two cases and by outlining future research on populist foreign policy.

Populism

Populism is a slippery concept that has been associated with authoritarianism, nationalism and unorthodox models of economic development.\textsuperscript{11} It has also been presented as a desirable normative path to radical democracy.\textsuperscript{12} Populism is surely a contested concept,\textsuperscript{13} whose use has often been stretched beyond its analytical utility.\textsuperscript{14} Rovira Kaltwasser et al. stress the need for clarity to prevent conceptual stretching that mixes populism with other closely related concepts such as nationalism, xenophobia in Europe, or clientelism in Latin America.\textsuperscript{15}

This article uses the ideational approach to populism that considers it a ‘thin-centred ideology’ with a definite core: the people, the elite and the general will.\textsuperscript{16} ‘The people’ is a construction that is malleable for leader manipulation – it may refer to the people as sovereign, to identify the nation excluding the elite, and/or with the purpose of identifying the common people. ‘The elite’ is usually the political and economic elite of the country. Finally, the ‘general will’ reflects a populist leader’s belief that he knows what the people want and deserve.

The benefit of using the ideational approach is that it captures the domestic institutional setting of a country and the thicker ideologies that blend with populism at home as they inform the foreign policy process. Populism as a thin-centred ideology can therefore take different shapes, that is, left-right, socialist or neoliberal, and globalist or regionalist foreign policies.\textsuperscript{17} The roles that we might observe being played by different populist leaders will thus vary as a result of context, but if populism influences the foreign policy of states, we will see the core, elite versus people and the general will as part of the process of their role-play. We will also see how the selection of roles by the leader is justified at home and abroad through reference to these basic attributes. Moreover, the thicker ideologies combined with populism will also inform the type of roles an actor will select to play internationally.
Roles in foreign policy: Domestic and external dimensions

Role theory

Roles are relational as a role conception is composed of the self-side (ego) and the expectations of others (alter). Any role needs a counterrole to form a role relationship. The role-counterrole interaction is the essence of the role location process, which is the process of locating a role within a social structure. However, not every alter is the same for ego in a social interaction. There are general and significant others that act as alter(s) in the making of a role for ego. An actor that has routinised social interactions and experience is likely to know how to confront the demands of a situation without having to directly interact with a significant other, but just by following the cues emanating from a system as a general other. A significant other is a primary socialising agent for ego like a patron for ego as a client. The self is also likely to have a social hierarchy of significant others. The self will engage in role-play, which is the actual behaviour displayed by ego, while role enactment refers to how well an actor performs a role once located, that is, advanced by the self and accepted by the other. It is through role-based behaviour that the self shows others who this actor is or aspires to be in a given context, and it is through role expectations that the other indicates whether it agrees with the envisaged role of the self.

Symbolic interactionist role theory also has a micro-dimension in which individuals, in this case the leader in power, provide narratives to justify the role conception and play of an actor. Moreover, the narrations of the leader may be one of the factors that induce emotional responses in the people as well as the elite, such as anger and fear. In terms of foreign policy, the populist leader’s rhetoric when conceiving and playing a role may produce emotions or amplify pre-existing ones among followers when referring to an internal enemy (national elite) or to external enemy images such as a transnational elite, a specific group of people, or a specific state.

The domestic factors of role-play

A role theory approach is well-suited to analyse populist foreign policy. Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has relied largely on the field of comparative politics to explain actions and motivations of an actor’s foreign policy. This domestic turn has been also present in the recent revival of role theory research. Cantir and Kaarbo claim that the analytical potential of role theory requires understanding the domestic influences, actors and interests in a state’s foreign policy. They present different domestic variables to study such domestic contestation of roles along a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Although Cantir and Kaarbo focus on debunking the assumed consensus around a role, their work also shows that domestic factors help us explain the interests, institutions and actors, as well as the ideologies and identity influencing the process of role making. Thus, to understand the roles that populist governments conceive and play internationally, we must look at domestic politics since populism starts there and gains meaning internationally through its interaction with thick or other thin ideologies.
Lantis and Beasley note that a party’s ideology serves to set the boundaries of debates on foreign policy. Thus, the ideological standing of a populist government can be extracted from its party affiliation and their position on the classic left-right divide. While some populists created their own movements and institutionalised them (e.g. Chávez, or Fujimori in Peru), others came from well-established parties, such as Menem in Argentina (i.e. the Justicialist Party). However, the creation and institutionalisation of political parties occurs prior to becoming president, which allows leaders to identify themselves on the left-right spectrum and the resulting ‘thick’ ideologies this entails.

Models of economic development will also inform the foreign economic policy roles a leader can enact, and their overall views about globalisation and regional economic integration schemes. Therefore, elucidating whether a populist government pursues a socialist, neoliberal or corporatist model of economic development can indicate whether a state supports regional economic integration or not, the type of regional integration it favours, and its position on globalisation. Regardless of which model is chosen, the populist leader will justify his choices with reference to the people versus the elite and the general will.

Thus, these traditional FPA domestic factors are sources of role making for populist governments. They (right-left, socialist-neoliberal models of socio-economic development, and protectionist vs open trade policies) can provide cues to ego and external others on how to perform a selected role internationally.

The external dimension – foreign policy principles

Two principles that explain the foreign policy orientation of Latin American states are dependency and autonomy, which ‘... refer to the ability to develop and implement foreign policy with(out) international influence’. In its basic form, the argument is that Latin American states’ foreign policy strategies since independence can be reduced to the quest for autonomy from colonial/hegemonic powers. The other side of the story is that hegemonic powers have sought to establish asymmetrical conditions to attract Latin American states to which some governments (and elite groups) are keen. This means that hegemonic powers such as the United States may provide incentives for Latin American states to adopt a foreign policy of dependency.

The United States has long played a socialiser role in the region. The United States made a speech act of support to the new republics through the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which became the cornerstone of its regional foreign policy. The speech act of ‘the Americas for the Americans’ underpinned the United States regional power role in Latin America. The United States used this doctrine to influence the development of the republics and thus sought to establish patterns of asymmetric political and economic dependence.

While Latin American states welcomed the support to eradicate European influence, they also sought autonomy from the US regional power. The quest for autonomy became a cornerstone for many states’ foreign policies in the region, but during the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, this quest became a priority. In fact, most of the literature on Latin American foreign policy starts from these two principles. When it comes to dependency, the assumption is an existing structural asymmetry between the United States
and Latin American states. Despite the existing asymmetries, Latin American states were still able to obtain gains in negotiations with the United States, which provided an incentive for elite groups and governments to maintain US dependence.

Cameron Thies uses this axis of autonomy and dependence to show the different roles Latin American states may enact alongside an additional axis of core and anti-core orientation that captures whether policymakers are agreeable or hostile to the dominant powers and the order they enforce. The latter aspects are analytically useful to see whether a populist government follows or rejects the governance and multilateral architecture under the US global hegemony. Thies relies on these two axes (autonomy vs dependency and pro- and anti-core) to locate the roles originally identified by Holsti. Yet, Holsti’s roles neglect the important political-economic dimension of policy. Populism in Latin America as an ideology is also fed by patterns of economic development, which means that populist governments have roles in their role-sets that are more economic and/or trade based in nature. Thus, populist governments also have policies towards the positive and negative effects of globalisation, multilateral economic institutions and regional economic integration schemes.

**Observations, caveats and method**

Role conception and role-play tend to reflect domestic sources as well as the international locations and contexts where these roles of populist governments are performed. As populism is a thin ideology, its domestic and external manifestation will depend on the thick ideology that populism is mixed with, or on another type of thin ideology that informs policy. These ideologies permeate politics in terms of party positioning and models of socio-economic development. Below, there are two causal process observations that are first cut propositions to guide the empirical analysis of the cases of Menem and Chávez.

- **Proposition I (domestic dimension)**. The role-play of a populist leader in regional and extra-regional relations will be shaped by their left/right political ideology, socialist/neoliberal socio-economic orientation and protectionist/free trade orientation in response to globalisation.
- **Proposition II (international dimension)**. The more a populist leader strives for autonomy and adopts an anti-core orientation, the more likely his or her foreign policy will reflect anti-elitist and pro-people components in its narrative and actions. And, the more a leader is close to the axis of dependency than autonomy and pro-core than anti-core, the less his or her foreign policy will show narratives and actions that reflect anti-elitism and pro-masses, despite being a populist government at home.

What differs for a populist versus non-populist foreign policy is the rhetoric used to justify the role choices. In these role choices, a populist government follows the people-elite division, as well as the principles of autonomy and dependency, and pro-core and anti-core. A populist government whose thick ideology is socialism will tend to enact roles associated with autonomy, such as anti-imperialist agent, non-aligned role, isolate role and bastion of
revolution. If the same populist government is anti-core, then the roles associated with the thick ideology and autonomy principle will be performed within and against institutions that restrict such an autonomous foreign policy. In this sense, the posture may be against multilateral institutions and will promote more national or regional alternatives, but above all try to reduce the influence of multilateral institutions.

When a populist government conceives roles informed by thick ideologies, such as neoliberalism, then dependency and pro-core are the most likely principles to follow in foreign policy. Within these axes, a state will enact the roles of aligned state, multilateral state, ally/partner role and global free trader at the global level. Regionally, the same actor may conceive an open regionalist state role. This role involves the insertion of the self into the global markets from a regional group, which differs from a closed regionalist state role that seeks to protect itself from such global trends through a regionally isolated group (as would be the case when autonomy and anti-core principles predominate).

If populism is fed by nationalism as a thin ideology, then the most likely roles a populist government will play are that of an isolate state, non-aligned role and internal developer at the expense of an international or regional developer role. If regional projects are part of the populist government’s context, then foreign policy will either freeze regionalist efforts hoping they will fail or directly undermine existing regional integration groups. Overall the state will enact roles that secure autonomy and increase distance from the core.

One caveat is that not all governments that pursue autonomy or dependency and pro-core or anti-core principles are populist, nor should their foreign policies be assumed so. Populism is first and foremost a domestic process that may have international ramifications. A second caveat is that not all governments that adopt dependency and pro-core as a strategy do so as a result of subjugation to the hegemonic power. In fact, dependency and pro-core as part of an asymmetrical relationship may have pays-off for the smaller party. Roles in populist governments with certain thick ideologies or with an another thin ideology may overlap and be similar, but leaders will tend to justify their role selection with reference to the core of populism as a thin-centred ideology.

This article adopts a narrative-based approach that fits comfortably with symbolic interactionist role theory. An interpretive narrative method allows us to analyse the repertoires that give rise to roles, behavioural patterns of an actor, and the rhetorical justifications of that actor when enacting a role. Narratives are understood as strategies constructed by leaders with the purpose of framing and casting roles and achieving specific foreign policy goals and interests. Leaders must draw on cultural resources that resonate within their society and across the societies of significant others. Populism is about narrating a story of the people against an elite with the purpose of achieving an ideal nation which is the expression of the general will. Populist leaders also advance a narration of the type of international actor they want their state to be by following principles and casting roles that help them to achieve their foreign policy goals.

**Populism and foreign policy in Argentina**

*Menem’s foreign policy roles in economic and security issues*

Argentina has traditionally played an active independent role in international politics, while adopting other complementary roles such as non-aligned, developing and
third-world state. Thus, Argentina historically prioritised the principle of autonomy from the United States with some periods of strategic alignment. It has also promoted a leader role in the South American region at times. Yet, when Carlos Menem took power, Argentina experienced a process of role change to include faithful ally, aligned state, regional integrationist and multilateralist state. These roles reflect the thick ideology informing Menem’s populism and movement towards the axis of dependency and pro-core. Moreover, the narrative underpinning these roles should also show anti-elitism and pro-people components. Conversely, Argentina in this period is expected to reject regional closed projects and entrapment that undermine its new role-set.

Menem has been called a neo-populist leader. Once in power, he faced a context of high inflation and a deteriorating economy without access to external credit. This set the stage for an ideological transition to neoliberalism. Menem, despite being a member of the Peronist Party, broke with the party tradition of state intervention and left ideological positioning under Perón by adopting neoliberalism as an economic model and ideological foundation of his project. This does not mean that a domestic economic consensus was present, but instead systemic pressures afforded Menem an opportunity to change Argentina’s roles within the global economy. The politics of International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionality is essential to understand these radical changes in Argentina’s roles.

Gaining access to IMF credit meant a series of reforms, including liberalisation of labour and capital markets, and unilateral reduction of tariff barriers. Menem also used decree-laws to bypass congressional approval to advance neoliberal reforms and avoid contestation from different groups over the new model and associated roles. At the same time, Menem also established strategic alliances with trade union leaders in order to fragment the unions and his own political party (Justicialismo or Peronismo). The Peronist party has a tradition of representing the interests of workers’ groups in Argentina. However, Menem framed the economic changes as for the benefit of the people and resistance to his reforms as coming from the bureaucratic elite. Corruption for Menem was present in the elite of the state that paradoxically belongs to Peronismo. Menem was able to locate himself as the saviour of the people by pursuing liberalising economic policies that affected the traditional state-based elite, and by introducing short-term measures to alleviate the effects of such reforms for the poorest sectors of the population. In addition, convertibility solved the hyperinflation problem and allowed the people to access imported goods at affordable prices.

Intraparty dynamics also help explain why Menem was able to construct a narrative of people versus elite domestically. Menem belonged to the Justicialist party, but was never a member of its Buenos Aires elite. He came from the peripheral province of La Rioja that had little influence in Peronist party politics. During his electoral campaign, and once in power, he used this ‘outsider’ narrative to connect to the people, and locate himself ideologically within the poor and forgotten traditional roots of the Peronist movement. In this process of transformation, the populist leader referred to collective emotions to secure acceptance to his radical reforms. Menem’s reference to the fear of the previous hyperinflation period was also part of his narration to blame the bureaucratic elite for Argentina’s economic period, reduce the political pressure on ongoing
economic privatisation and justify his role selection that made Argentina a new faithful ally of the United States and a follower of economic globalisation.46

As the neoliberal model was implemented, Argentina also pursued a regional and international strategy to lock-in the new domestic reforms. Regionally, Argentina conceived an open regional trade integrationist role relationship with Brazil, her main trading partner. This role was enacted through the construction of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) in 1991 on an equal footing with Brazil.47 Although MERCOSUR’s origin was made possible by the swift change in the role relationship of rivalry to one of friends between Argentina and Brazil,48 this regional group was designed to achieve economic integration between its members and into global economic markets.49 In this role conception of a regional trade integrationist, Argentina’s significant other was Brazil, as the latter played counterroles of friend, partner and regional trade integrationist state. However, social cues from the global economic system also prompted the regional trade integrationist country role. The post-Cold War triumph of the United States promised the diffusion of benefits from the neoliberal model and an expansion of economic globalisation.50

Internationally, Argentina also played the regional trade integrationist role in an effort to integrate into the multilateral system. Argentina enacted the role of a multilateralist trading state as Argentina complied with the rules and regulations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) following its domestic economic transformation. Moreover, Argentina under Menem enacted the new role of faithful ally with the United States, which has been referred to in Spanish as a period of ‘relaciones carnales’ (carnal relations).51 Carlos Menem brought all areas of the government’s policy, especially those of defence and foreign affairs into the service of economic development.52 During Menem’s presidency, the promise of the faithful ally role was grounded in the idea that challenges to US leadership in security and political-diplomatic areas were detrimental to economic development fuelled by American investors.53

In the security sector, the change to faithful ally was even more salient than in the economic domain as the relationship with the United States was the top priority, though it was supplemented by other relationships with MERCOSUR (especially Brazil), and European states. In fact, Argentina enacted the faithful ally role with a posture of complete alignment and followership to the US leader role in security issues. Argentina became a peacekeeper through the United Nations (UN) and supported the United States during the Gulf War by sending two ships, which provided symbolic meaning for the type of relationship it wanted to establish with the United States. The support in the Gulf War was the key to being awarded the status of major extra-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally in 1997, even though Argentina desired full membership. Argentina also supported the US occupation of Haiti in 1994 when all other regional states opposed it. In these actions, Argentina showed the priority of the aligned and faithful ally roles at the expense of its traditional principle of non-intervention.54 Moreover, Menem also changed Argentina’s posture regarding non-proliferation by dismantling the Condor II project.55 In the diplomatic arena, Argentina enacted the aligned role and faithful ally role by condemning the human rights policies of Cuba and withdrawing criticisms of Israeli policies in the Middle East. These two issues were usually where the
North–South and Non-Aligned Movement diverged with the United States and where Argentina was traditionally against the United States.\(^{56}\) The role location process of the aligned and faithful ally roles was welcomed and accepted by the United States. The context of the end of the Cold War, the triumph of neoliberalism and the emergence of the United States as sole superpower help to explain the new posture of Argentina towards the United States and the acceptance of the new roles of aligned and faithful ally by others.\(^{57}\) Menem’s new neoliberal model of economic development became a key source for the roles to be played internationally in both economic and diplomatic and security social settings. Menem, in other words, was a role entrepreneur. This is important to emphasise as other states in Latin America were also influenced by the same systemic pressures and economic needs but did not adopt a US faithful ally role, as the role is an expression of the principle of dependency. Certainly, others followed the United States with regard to economic cooperation, but did not have the same enthusiasm as Argentina on security and diplomatic issues. In fact, Argentina started to be seen by others as a US faithful ally, which reaffirmed this new identity as this new role was the most salient identity marker for other regional states. Even though Argentina and Brazil continued cooperating in MERCOSUR, the political-diplomatic level of the interaction with the United States generated resentment in Brasilia. Thus, it was Carlos Menem and his capacity for agency that sustained the new role actively played between 1989 and 1999. In these role relationships, Menem prioritised new roles that favoured the relationship with the United States and multilateral institutions it promoted. The populist justification for these roles was that they benefitted the masses and represented the general will of the people. The anti-elitist component is present in the international actions that reduced the size of the bureaucratic elite in the state apparatus. Thus, the core of populism is present in this case, that is, pro-people, anti-elitism and the general will. They provided Menem’s justification for Argentina’s role change that destroyed the power of bureaucratic elite that stopped, delayed and undermined the economic reforms of this country that would benefit the people. Most importantly, the Argentine case shows how populism as thin-centred ideology gains meaning in foreign policy when it is analysed along with its thick companion ideology.

### Populism and foreign policy in Venezuela

#### Venezuela under Chávez: economic, social and security roles

Chávez has been classified as a populist leader of the third wave of populism in Latin America.\(^{58}\) The justification of his roles should contain the elements of populism. Chávez’s thick ideology of socialism adopted an economic model of strong state intervention, and autonomy and anti-core principles as key drivers of its foreign policy. Thus, the types of foreign policy roles expected are the anti-imperialist agent, liberator role, and even bastion of the revolution.

Chávez’s government changed the rentier system of oil revenues that previously accrued to the traditional elite that maintained the *partidocracia* system.\(^{59}\) Chávez used the oil revenues for redistributive policies for the people, especially for social programmes which served the purpose of broadening his electoral platform.\(^{60}\) Moreover,
Chávez introduced reforms in the political sphere such as the approval of a new constitution in 1999. The political and economic reforms created a distant relationship with the existing political parties. These changes laid the foundations for the revolutionary role at the domestic level. These reforms, later deepened, were also the beginning of the rift between the traditional economic and political elite and Chávez and his followers, that is, the people.

As Chávez cemented a new role for Venezuela through political reforms and a more radical economic model after the failed coup, he also started to erode the foundations of a democratic and economically open society. Internationally, the removal of these role traditions meant that Venezuela’s located a new role relationship with the United States. Chávez ended the traditional friend and partner role of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. The United States became the enemy and rival in a new role relationship with Venezuela, as the US Ambassador recognised the new government of Pedro Carmona during a failed 3-day coup. Thus, a new model of economic development, the expansion of his political party, and the ideology of Socialism of twenty-first century were the key pillars that informed Chávez reforms at home and external relations. We can observe two traditions confronting each other in Venezuela: one promoted by Chávez and his followers which advocated the revolutionary role. This role was linked by Chávez himself to the figure of Simón Bolívar, that is, the founding father of Venezuela’s republic. The other tradition was defending Venezuela’s reputation as one of the few long-standing Latin American democracies – even in times when many South American states were controlled by authoritarian governments (1960s–1980s).

Not only did Chávez’s government use the history of the nation, but he himself also adapted it to his own personal story as leader. Specifically, he used the figure of Simón Bolívar to justify the change of governmental model and then also to solidify it. Chávez enacted the roles of bastion of revolution and liberator role as he presented himself as the new leader to liberate the people of Venezuela from the oligarchs and elites, but also the saviour and liberator of South America from the cultural, political and economic predominance of the United States. For instance, Chávez called the opposing elite to his project ‘sons of the Empire’, ‘puppets of the US’, ‘aristocrats and landowners’ as well as golpistas in reference to their participation in the failed coup in 2002. The political elite started to call Chávez’s Venezuela ‘the new Cuba’, led by ‘socialists and communists’. This rhetoric from both Chávez and the opposition reflected the bargaining over the meaning and direction of the role to be conceived by Chávez vis-à-vis the role prescribed by internal others. Moreover, this antagonistic rhetoric from the leader also sought to solidify the expected followership from the people by amplifying positive emotions when referring to the pueblo and augmenting fear and anger against the traditional political and economic elite of Venezuela. Similar emotions also were present in the international dimension as Chávez referred to the United States as the enemy.

Moreover, the credibility of Chávez and his government in promoting a new revolutionary role was also based on his personal past as a soldier. Chávez was imprisoned for leading a failed coup against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992, whose origin was the socio-economic conditions of the military forces and el pueblo. According to Thies, Chávez conceived himself in the role of soldier of the homeland,
who was ready to burden the costs of his military actions (leader of the failed coup in 1992) and of his governmental actions for achieving the general will of the people through a revolutionary role that encompasses social, economic, political and cultural dimensions.\(^{73}\)

Thus, Chávez pursued a new leftist ideology that led to the adoption of a new model of socio-economic development, that is, Socialism of the twenty-first century. Moreover, Chávez advanced antagonistic rival role narrations, that is, the people versus the elite, which were not only domestic in nature but impacted the role relationship with the United States. Chávez in his narration wanted to break with the pattern of dependency against the United States by pursuing a foreign policy driven by the principle of autonomy. Analytically, the domestic and international levels of analysis are hard to disentangle in the case of Chávez as in his narrative domestic rival, enemy and friend roles go hand in hand with the international dimension.\(^{74}\) In fact, this domestic dimension of the revolutionary role runs in parallel to Venezuela’s foreign policy strategy. The making of the revolutionary role involved identifying role models of revolution that could offer complementary role relationships, and by having a negative role model of what Venezuela did not want to be as a social actor.\(^{75}\) The ‘positive’ role model was Cuba, which has a long tradition of holding a revolutionary role and since the end of the Cold War also enacting more of an isolationist role. And the ‘negative’ one was the United States which was depicted as an imperialist state.\(^{76}\) Thus, Chávez sought to locate a role-counterrole of revolutionary – imperialist vis-à-vis the United States. Sagarzazu and Thies document Chávez’s anti-imperialist rhetoric and demonstrate it was deployed most frequently when the price of oil was high; providing the means for him to carry out his anti-imperialist projects at home and across Latin America.\(^{77}\)

Cuba as significant other recognised and validated the role of Venezuela as a revolutionary state within the regional system of Latin America. Furthermore, Cuba’s recognition of Venezuela as a revolutionary state made it possible for Venezuela to advance its idea of having a regional platform such as ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) to disseminate the benefits of the Socialism of the twenty-first century.\(^{78}\) ALBA initially consisted of Cuba and Venezuela when created in 2004, but later, other states with similar beliefs joined, including Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. These state actors also expected that Venezuela could use its economic resources to subsidise their own new left-oriented models of development.\(^{79}\)

Venezuela also relied on the use of antagonistic rhetoric towards US friends in Latin America. The use of rivalry and enemy rhetoric was a necessary element in the sustenance of the revolutionary role for Chávez’s South American mission. For instance, Colombia was seen as a threat to the revolutionary process given its faithful ally role with the United States, which made it a satellite state of American imperialism.\(^{80}\) However, the main antagonistic role for Chávez was the United States, despite it serving as the main destination for Venezuela’s oil exports.\(^{81}\) Chávez’s discourse in the UN General Assembly in 2006 is telling and not precisely for calling President Bush the devil, but for focusing on keywords such as resistance, anti-imperialism and autonomy as key drivers of Venezuela’s foreign policy and its mission in the world:
As the spokesman for imperialism, he (in reference to Bush) came to give us his recipes for, to try to preserve the current scheme of domination, exploitation and pillage over the peoples of the world [. . .] We are rising up against the Empire, against its model of domination [. . .]82

While Venezuela located the revolutionary role as a master role, understood as the most salient characteristic of an international actor, the government was also able to locate and advance other complementary regional roles that underpinned it, such as leader.83 Chávez was the leader within the ALBA regional group. He supplemented the use of material incentives such as the revenues from oil exports to secure followership with narrative, as he linked his missionary role in South America with the figure of Simón Bolívar as the liberator of Latin America from Spanish colonial rule, and his dream in creating a unified Latin America. In fact, Chávez presented the ALBA group as the realisation of Bolivar’s dream of a unified Latin American region.84 The overall purpose was to liberate the countries of South America from the United States’ hegemonic power and global economy ideology, as well as the Latin American people from the dominant elites that in Chávez’s view were an extension of US dominance.

Beyond Latin America, Chávez tried to advance his revolutionary role to secure independence and autonomy without much success as expectations from great powers did not include security cooperation and role relationships of faithful allies.85 In fact, Chávez expressed both the aspirations and limitations of becoming a revolutionary state in the international system by pushing for the establishment of ideological alliances with China and Russia, two actors that rejected such an approach and have kept the focus on the economic and trade dimensions of their respective bilateral relationships.86 Countries that seek to reform but not outright challenge the current world order87 – like China and Russia – have cultivated a pragmatic acceptance of Venezuela’s activism, inasmuch as these countries balance the US predominance. This tolerance is also bestowed for reasons of bilateral trade – for example, investments in the oil industry, arms purchases and the provision of credits. Venezuela under Chávez also developed ties with peer countries – such as Iran, Syria and to a lesser extent Belarus – that also opposed to the US worldview. Besides periods of joint rhetoric against the United States like with Iran,88 these alliances were hard to maintain. Chávez’s revolutionary role worked better in Latin America as he had the capacity to use both material incentives and generate ideological convergence to sustain his foreign policy of autonomy seeking by adopting the role of revolutionary, leader, and faithful ally.

Conclusion

This article dealt with two simple questions about the types of roles populist governments conceive and play, and how these roles are used and performed by the populist leader. This article showed that there is not just one type of populist foreign policy, while it also challenged the notion that populist foreign policies are always anti-plural, anti-democratic and anti-liberal order. The article relied on the ideational definition of populism and its core dimensions: anti-elitism, the people and the general will. Moreover, the article used a role theory framework to analyse the self-definitions of the situation vis-à-vis the expectations of others in the form of regional and international systemic
cues or coming directly from significant others. However, populism as a social phenomenon, which starts domestically, needs to reflect such a domestic dimension and thus the sources of ideological, political and economic influences from the domestic level that shape and inform the role choices of populist governments on the international stage. Theoretically, role theory allows for incorporating classical aspects of foreign policy analysis. The incorporation of these elements was done through the use of dichotomies left-right, and neoliberal versus state intervention as models of economic development. These dichotomies reflect what populism is about as populism in Latin America and beyond comes in many forms. As populism is a thin-centred ideology, its external manifestations can only be comprehended when one also pays attention to the thick or other thin ideologies that are combined with it. The dichotomies presented in this article represent these set of ideologies. Moreover, this domestic dimension was linked to the foreign policy principles of Latin American governments; that is, autonomy and dependency and core and anti-core, which allowed us to trace both Argentine and Venezuelan foreign policy orientations and roles.

When one summarises the types of roles both Argentina under Menem and Venezuela under Chávez conceived and played, we see an ideological gap between both leaders but a common feature brings them together under the populist label. Both had the charisma and overall personal leadership (role entrepreneurs) to advance and locate the roles of their own choice for their respective countries. Menem relied on his personal leadership to break with the Argentine foreign policy tradition of being an (active) independent state in foreign affairs for the role of faithful ally of the United States. Menem sacrificed his own personal reputation to adopt a role that ended Argentina’s historic quest for autonomy. Instead, Menem adopted dependency as a key principle of its foreign relations with the United States and the global economic system. All of Menem’s moves were designed to secure the model of economic development at home. Menem’s populism at home and on the international stage can only be understood when populism is analysed alongside the companion thick ideology. Moreover, when Menem used his political capital to implement radical economic reforms at home and to secure them internationally, these were rhetorically justified in a populist manner. Menem believed that the people would benefit from achieving a sustainable economic model of development through open markets and a stable currency. These reforms and the roles Argentina played internationally were also rhetorically used to target the enemy of the people by appealing to existing emotions against the elite; in this case, the bureaucratic elite that were hampering such economic reforms. The idea of reducing the size of the state was in line with neoliberalism, and also served the purpose of reducing the bureaucratic elite that Menem’s neoliberal populism was fighting against.

Unlike Menem, Chávez adopted a high degree of autonomy in foreign policy as his leitmotiv in order to terminate the pattern of dependency with the United States. Chávez also triggered a process of role change by advancing a role conception of a revolutionary state that blurred the boundaries of national and international in his narratives. He used his own personal past and that of the nation to cement the new role. This new role also complemented the role of anti-imperialist agent. In these new roles, we see the strong presence of a thick ideology that was also present in Chávez’s radical left ideological identification and the promotion of a new socio-economic model of Socialism of the
twenty-first century. As the revolutionary role was located and secured at home, Chávez started to promote a similar role regionally which was accepted by the audience of states that also experienced a switch to the left of the political spectrum (Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Argentina and Brazil). However, Chávez’s role of a missionary and revolutionary was underpinned by his attempts to act as a regional leader. Chávez was the salient leader of the ALBA regional group. Internationally, beyond Latin America, Chávez’s attempts to promote his revolutionary role were not as successful as he expected. In his revolutionary role, Chávez amplified emotional reactions from the people against the elite to secure followship for his project. Chávez identified enemies and rivals, which are the elite at home and in Latin America, who are seen by Chávez as an extension of the United States. In the revolutionary role, Chávez received the recognition and support of Cuba as his main significant other. Unlike Menem, Chávez fuelled his narrations of being a revolutionary with the use of hard references to the United States and the national and regional elites, but for Chávez, this was part of his mission as soldier of the home (and regional) land in order to secure his government autonomy and those of his regional friends. Like Menem, Chávez relied on his personal charisma and political capital to conceive, select and locate these different roles.

Following the propositions outlined earlier, one can conclude that the Chávez case shows more of the core elements of anti-elitism and the promotion of the general will for the masses. The promotion of these elements fed a domestic audience and helped to secure centre-left alliances regionally and beyond. However, the impact of such populism was more effective regionally than internationally despite Chávez’s constant alliance seeking behaviour with Iran, Syria and Belarus. In other words, the domestic nexus of populism and foreign policy is more robust for Chávez’s case. However, this finding does not make Menem less of a populist leader than Chávez. Menem used Argentina’s new faithful ally and open regional integrationist roles for economic reasons, and to eradicate the influence of the political (bureaucratic) elite at home. What is common to both populist leaders’ foreign policies is that their international roles were shaped by the thick ideologies adopted in their populist projects that sought to benefit the people, reduce the power of the elite and govern for the general will. Yet, implementation of such domestic goals internationally required these leaders to follow different paths, as one followed radical autonomy and the other a faithful dependency.

Finally, the study of the roles populist leaders pursue internationally is a first step to understanding the nexus of populism and foreign policy within and beyond Latin America. However, this study opens up new directions for future research. Research on populist foreign policy may not necessarily require adopting an inside-out approach as the one herein advanced. Instead, one could also study this topic from a perspective that focuses on how international role actions of populist governments tend to fuel the domestic narratives and actions of populism at home. Moreover, this article lightly touched upon emotional responses either generated or amplified by populist rhetoric in foreign policy, mostly in regard to the people. Populist leaders’ foreign policy research could also focus on the type of insecurities that foreign policy narrations provoke in the national and the cosmopolitan elite, as well as on other states and their respective leaderships that are from the populist leaders’ point of view constructed as enemies, rivals and friends.
This article also points to another direction of research, which is to compare populist governments’ foreign policies to those which are not populist at all. Studying this latter topic may shed light on the populist content of foreign policies not only for Latin America but also for other regions. Nevertheless, the current project established that in different ways, both Chávez and Menem show certain elements of their populist agendas in their international role-based behaviour. Only when populism as a thin-centre ideology is analysed along with the thick or thin ideologies that inform the populist political project, it is possible to determine how populism is used internationally by its leaders and the different types of roles populist government enact. Populist foreign policies are diverse and not monolithic as is often assumed.

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