

The development of populism in argentina and peru during the 20th century

[History](#)



The paper will study populism as political movement widely used in the countries of Latin America throughout the twentieth century. The methods applied and the progress of populism will be investigated on the basis of political history of two countries: Argentina and Peru. In order to fulfil thorough examination, the paper will narrate the main aspects of populism and then compare and contrast its Argentinean and Peruvian versions. Finally, all the findings of the paper will be summarized and analyzed in the conclusion.

The term “ populism” was used to describe the politicians who claimed that they represent the interests of “ common people” as different from those of the powerful or rich.[1] Populist movements were not class-based. Though ideologically they were incoherent, they tried to be inclusive. The leaders were mainly charismatic and personalistic. The style of the leadership was demonstratively nationalistic, which meant that it was based either on native traditions or pseudo traditions of the country.

As a rule, populists evinced their deep concern for social justice, reform, betterment of the working class, and removing marginalization by integration of impoverished people into society. The class conflict was portrayed as alien. The core of populists’ promises was making necessary changes without altering the basic nature of society. Populist parties claimed that they knew all the answers for national problems and those who opposed them were not true patriots of their nation. Populists usually sought alliance with unions and tended to build a centralized state where power was concentrated in the hands of the president.

According to Joel Horowitz, populism dominated in political history of Argentina.[2] Due to populism modern Argentina has unbridgeable schisms in its today's society, rhetoric and style of its politics. While the process of development, involved major sectors of society and attracted the support of masses of Argentineans. Populists called themselves the savours of the nation and the opponents of populism were defined as enemies of the people. In this way, " politics revolved around movements that won strong allegiances but excluded their enemies." [3] It caused a range of military takeovers, with the subsequent massive violence, where both military and civilians were involved.

The early stages of modern political system of Argentina and the first attempts to implement populist policy can be traced from 1980, when the Radical Party made an attempt to overthrow the government. Though this attempt failed, the radicals (Unión Cívica Radical) demonstrated their opposition to the existing political system and called for fair elections. It constituted a serious threat of revolution in Argentina because the party was supported by the middle class of society. However, many of the leaders of the radicals were from elite. The Radical leaders appealed directly to the working class of Argentina.

Hipólito Yrigoyen (1852-1933), a son of a woman from the elite and a Basque blacksmith, became the first prominent politician who started his career as a leader of the radicals and obtained popularity by using the methods of populism. He created the mechanism of a modern political party and easily outmaneuvered his rivals. He made himself a symbol of the

radical party, represented its hopes and developed his leadership into a whole cult of his personality.

However, Yrigoyen did not use the methods that characterize a conduct of a modern populist. He infrequently gave speech and rarely appeared in public. Hipólito Yrigoyen wrote very little 'for popular consumption' and his written works were difficult to understand. Yrigoyen's utterances contained insufficient political philosophy. Also, after becoming a president, Yrigoyen did not show a particular interest in any political program, instead, he seemed to be interested in power itself and its expansion. In addition, Hipólito Yrigoyen did not campaign using oratory of most populists or the flamboyant gestures. The strong points of his authorship were based on creating jobs and dispensing patronage.

Even from its early stages of development populism in Argentina relied on police and police chiefs in particular. Under the presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen, Buenos Aires chiefs of police functioned as key operatives and settled labor conflicts. The importance of police can be brightly illustrated using the example of Elpidio González's career path. González attempted to achieve the position of vice president, and minister of interior by gradually moving from minister of war, to the level of candidate for governor of Córdoba, one of the most important provinces, and then to police chief in Buenos Aires. Thus, under the policy of populism, "A good police chief was a man for all seasons." [4]

The early populist Hipólito Yrigoyen appealed to new groups of society and promised changes without altering social underlying nature. Yrigoyen was a marginal member of oligarchy and rural elite. As a result, while speaking on <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-populism-in-argentina-and-peru-during-the-20th-century/>

class conflict, he continuously attacked the ill-defined rural-based elite and the oligarchy, which attracted support middle and working classes of the country. Also, Hipólito Yrigoyen popularity among common people was strengthened when he started to treat people with low income as the true members of society. Later, in the 1940s, this approach was used by another charismatic populist leader- Juan Perón.

Some populist gestures of Hipólito Yrigoyen were too obvious. Thus, in 1917 when workers went on strike at a meatpacking plant, he refused to give an interview to the leaders of the cattlemen's association Sociedad Rural, which was considered to be most important social and economic group in Argentina. Such an attitude was noticed by the newspapers, and soon one of the chief national newspapers publicized an article where it emphasized that the leaders of the cattlemen's association were received not with the same attention as the striking workers of the plant.[5]

While his presidential campaign, Hipólito Yrigoyen turned to the native-born working class which was rapidly growing at that time. Yrigoyen understood that the working class of Argentina could be a huge potential source of voters. This became possible due to influential ideology of Syndicalism. In 1910 Syndicalism turned into a vigorous labor movement that disdained bourgeois and proclaimed revolution through a general strike. Hipólito Yrigoyen was willing to ally with Syndicalists because they did not have other political ties and would block the growth of Yrigoyen's serious rival - the Socialist party.

The government of Hipólito Yrigoyen did not interfere with the activity of Argentinean Syndicalism and, moreover, made steps to satisfy demands of <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-populism-in-argentina-and-peru-during-the-20th-century/>

strikers, for example, to improve their conditions, to employers to accept the role the unions in hiring workers. Of course, later the role of Yrigoyen in settling early strikes was stressed by his publicity during the 1927-28 presidential campaign.

In 1930 the most celebrated wave of populism flooded Argentina. Argentinean government that ruled from the period of 1932-1943 mainly belonged to neoconservatives, who included the members of traditional landed elite and tried to keep up a pretense of democracy. The exigencies of the Great Depression forced the implementation of the policy of import substitution industrialization that prompted rapid expansion of Argentinean urban working class. From 1932 to 1943 quick urbanization and industrialization in Argentina alienated the expanded already working class from the rest of society, and this process prepared the ground for the social crisis. The military takeover changed the situation radically by giving the power to the military group and their leader Col. Juan Domingo Perón (1891-1974).

Col. Juan Domingo Perón became the next major populist leader in Argentina. According to the article Populism and Its Legacies in Argentina authored by Joel Horowitz, Peron can be described as “ a tall, commanding figure and a powerful speaker, had the ability to charm people and win them to his side. He was one of those rare politicians imbued with genuine charisma.”[6] He, like his predecessor Hipólito Yrigoyen, also turned to working class, though strengthened his power with the help of the army. In late 1943 Perón was appointed to occupy the position of vice president and minister of war. In October Perón already became head of the National

Department of Labor, which served as a platform the implementation of his approaches to labor, setting contacts with unions and winning over the hearts and minds the working class of Argentina.

The policy of Col. Juan Domingo Perón had two directions: first, Perón favored and assisted many units to accomplish the major part of their long-sought goals; second, he started repression against uncooperative organizations. As a result of a pro-labor direction, the government enforced labor laws, such important ones as making contracts with workers, for the first time in the history of Argentina. It balanced the powers of capital and labor in the country, increased wages and improved the organization of unions.

On the other hand, Peron fought his rivals by using repression, which made his regime completely authoritarian. The leaders of Socialists and Communists had to live under the constant threat of being arrested. In order to survive, other political forces, for example, the Communist Party, had to go underground. The rivalry with Communist unions was supported by the government, which also prohibited cooperation with them. As a result, such important unions as textiles, meatpacking, and the metal trades were destroyed.

Peron personally appealed to unions. His charisma always helped his to achieve a desired effect. Peron stressed the importance of the unions while speaking to them: " I come to the house of the railroaders as if it were my own. I profess a profound gratitude to them, because I am convinced that many of the successes of the Secretariat . . . are due precisely to the railroad workers." [7] In his speech, Peron presented himself as one of the workers, as <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-populism-in-argentina-and-peru-during-the-20th-century/>

their equal, and frequently emphasized how he cared about them. This approach was successful, since workers had been socially and politically isolated by the previous regime.

Still, according to Horowitz, Peron ca not be viewed as a dictator. He was truly a populist, and the methods of repression can be explained by his desire to expand his bases of support.[8] An important reason of why Peron achieved enormous popularity in his country, as Horowitz states, was the fast economic growth. It was estimated that during the first years of Peron's presidency, hourly wages grew 25 percent more, and in 1947 increased almost at the same rate. The percentage of national income that was going to workers also went up 25 percent. However, some sectors, for example, agriculture, did not benefit from the populism of Peron. Agriculture was squeezed for the sake of the urban sectors, the economy of which showed the highest rates of growth in 1946 and 1947. Nevertheless, in 1948 the economy of Argentina started to deteriorate.

Peron's populism improved political and social status of women in the country. In 1947 women of Argentina received the right to vote due to the activity of Peron's wife - Evita. Evita initiated the campaign for women's suffrage. She also created a separate Peronist woman's party in Argentina, the leader of which she soon became. Women's branches stretched across and soon captured the whole country. This was one more factor that encouraged popularization of Peron in Argentina, for " When Perón ran for reelection in 1951, he received a much higher percentage of votes from women than from men." [9]

Among other things, populism in Argentina was established on media. Peron managed to set a cultural hegemony that revised Argentina's vision of itself. Bearing in mind political influence of media, cultural hegemony was highly important although very difficult, since the movement of populism did not have any consistent ideology. Rituals were reformed and gained a "Peronized" meaning, for example, the celebration of May Day became an important national holiday to emphasize the benefits of hard labor and the role of the working class. Generally, all the holidays were invented to provide the idea of harmony and prosperity that existed under Perón. School curricula focused on Catholic values. Many provinces and cities in Argentina were named after Perón. Monuments to the charismatic leader were erected all over the country.

Like in Argentina in 1930, the need to install a new regime in Peru was evoked by the situation brightly characterized by Steve Stein in *The Paths to populism in Peru*: "The old regime could no longer respond to the powerful social and economic changes brought on by urbanization after World War I. This was especially true in and around the capital of Lima. The old political elite was morally and politically bankrupt." [10] But unlike the movement in Argentina, populism of the thirties in Peru consisted of two competing with each other populist movements: the party of Luis M. Sánchez Cerro and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre who was the leader of the APRA party.

The period of the thirties was marked in Peru with significant growth of the working classes political activity. This situation differs from that of Argentina. Though the working class of Argentina also increased in number in the same period, it suffered greatly from political and social isolation. The working

classes of Peru were more active: " working-class mobs staged demonstrations and rioting that destroyed his residence and those of some prominent supporters. During subsequent months the working classes dominated the urban political scene." [11] Also, unlike the experience of populism in Argentina, Peru's first notable steps in this policy and the first prominent populist leaders appeared only in 1930, which was much later than in Argentina.

Like the political situation of Argentina in 1930, populism of Peru came to power due to political crisis. However, the crisis of Peru was much deeper, that even the further existence of the nation was doubted. One of Peruvian generals described the climate of despair and fear that intensified with the fall of República Aristocrática: " Although it is painful for us to confirm it, unfortunately it appears as if a streak of ignorance, of madness, has invaded us, wresting from us our most innermost feelings of nationality." [12] Conservative politician Víctor Andrés Belaúnde deplored that " the very bases of civilized life threaten to disappear." [13] All these words referred to crisis, collapse and the following political vacuum, which occurred due to the fall of the elite-controlled political system of República Aristocrática that had been in power since 1895.

The two populist movements Sánchezcerrismo and Aprismo (APRA) were headed by Sánchez Cerro and Haya de la Torre and came to Peruvian government through elections in 1931, which was a more civilized way in comparison with that of Peron's. Mainly, the movements did not differ from each other. They both were vertical, patrimonial, with the relationships which were built on loyalty between leaders and their followers. The members of the

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parties were accepted from all the levels of society, which also contrasts with an anti-bourgeoisie, anti-elite and anti-oligarchic character of Argentinean populism.

However, unlike that of Sánchezcerrismo, the vertical structure of ARPA was based on strong ties between some social groups: the head of the party and unions, professional or employee associations. The leader of Sánchezcerrismo, Sánchez Cerro, on the other hand, tried to avoid any references to recognized social or occupation categories, stressing on principle of one-to-one commitment to each member of the party.

Sánchez Cerro, like Peron, also understood the importance of the working class and tried to take a pretense offriendshipwith common people. Luis M. Sánchez Cerro used his ethnic identity of a dark-skinned mestizo to show that he had common origins with masses. Since historicallyracismhad a strong impact on political, social, and economic relations in Peru, Cerro's image of the racial outsider became a powerful tool for gaining more support of the working-class. One of Cerro's working-class followers once said: " He was of our race, and because of that all us working people supported him." [14]

The image of the cholo candidate brought another advantage to Sánchez Cerro. The masses' identification with the friend of common people became persuasive for the theme of his campaign: everyone could approach Cerro and personally ask to help or to do an individual favor. As a result, poor voters and supporters flooded Sánchez Cerro's campaign headquarters. The availability of Sánchez created the notion that he was generous and willing to help everybody. Cerro patted his poor supplicants on the back, sometimes

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gave them money from the pocket or an article of clothing. Cerro spoke to his followers in simple language and used familiar forms ' tu', saying: Toma hijo, toma hija. Hijito, hijita, sí, ya vamos a ver " (Take this son, take that daughter. My little son, my little daughter, yes, we'll look into that).[15]

At the same time, Haya de la Torre adopted the role of " the father of the workers." When the campaign for the 1931 election started, la Torre became known as the father of APRA. As a result, his children were growing in numbers, as Stain put it, " far beyond a small group of union leaders, and high stakes were to be won in the election." [16] The image of father taken by la Torre matched his contagious smile, personal warmth, and generally pleasing disposition. During his person-to-person conversations Haya revolved around daily problems of his voters, and always showed his sympathetic understanding and his readiness to help with pertinent advice.

Even the enemies of Haya de la Torre could not help but envy Haya's skills of physical expression. Eudocio Ravines, leader of communists once remarked: " He possessed an ingenious and friendly loquacity that gave people the physical sensation of being loved, set apart individually from among the rest. He was acute at discovering and focusing on the immediate and small problems of the people and treating them with a captivating friendliness, verbally showing interest in them." [17]

In 1930-1931 real or imagined access to the populist leaders in Peru attracted poor people to them who sought protection of the politicians from adversary and crisis. The Great Depression became such a crisis that worsened the condition of the poor. On the background of the deepening impoverishment of the workers, populist leaders Sánchez Cerro and Haya de <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-populism-in-argentina-and-peru-during-the-20th-century/>

la Torre were seen as generous figures who could help and protect them. So, as historians concluded, “ far from radicalizing the Peruvian working classes, the depression drew them toward populist alternatives as the most faithful political embodiment of patrimonial social relations.”[18]

After the military had cut short the populism of Haya de la Torre and Sánchez Cerro by suppressing their movements, the overtones of populism were present in later campaigns and political movements. The next eight years were governed by Odría, whose political style strongly resembled that of Sánchez Cerro. Odría concentrated his attention on the rural poor that streamed into the capital in order to find jobs and charity. The president decided to develop a chain of ‘ political charities’ to become popular among the impoverished people of the city. President’s wife María Delgado de Odría frequently but very effectively paid visits to the slums, gifting poor with money and food, which soon was highly publicized. However, María’s actions were disdained by the elite who claimed that they were just blatant imitations of Eva Perón.

Odría showed paternalistic approach in his policy when he ordered legalization and formation of squatter settlements of the growing lower-class population in Lima. Consequently, an impressive number of popular masses paid homage to president and his wife. The largest plazas of Lima became the places of pro-government demonstrations. In this case the respect the poor can be regarded as their payback the man who understood and treated benevolently their needs. This positively characterizes populism both in Argentina and Peru, because, in spite of the fact that the initial reasons of the politicians were quite pragmatic, the disadvantaged and the most

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impoverished of the country received warmth and saw the kindness which, probably, gave them hope for better life.

The next populist in Peru Belaúnde evidenced his friendship with nation through the foundation of the National Front of Democratic Youth (FNJD). The supporters of Belaúnde, unlike the campaigns of the previous politicians who turned to lower circles of society, were among professionals students, and intellectuals. In addition, the hallmark of Belaúnde was dramatic symbolism, used in word and in action. Once, when the demonstration in his support was met by the police, ready to disperse the participants, he bravely tried to withstand the armed forces. Later it matched the symbolism of Belaúnde's first message during the campaign in 1956: " Youth! That is the battle cry of the political campaign I have been invited to embark upon. . . . If I am needed in the moment of conflict, they will find me at their side, sharing their fervor and living their hopes with them." [19]

Nevertheless, when Belaúnde won the elections, his government showed reluctance to fulfill rhetoric and high-flown promises. For example, Belaúnde declared that all the lands would be affected by the new agrarian reform project. Instead, he exempted properties needed to make ' industrial transformation of agricultural products.' It resulted into the situation when all the valuable and significant land such as coastal sugar or cotton plantations was not available for the purposes of the redistribution program. Ultimately, the gap between words and actions disillusioned the masses and led to the failure of his populist policy. In 1969 Belaúnde was overthrown by military forces and the new Revolutionary government was installed in Peru.

In general, paternalism and comforting of populist political leaders have always worked like societal narcotic in Argentina and Peru. Quite a paradoxical situation could be observed when the poor and desperate continue to vote for populist leaders whose democratic credentials are suspect. Later the populist policies of these leaders will hurt the very groups that vaulted them into office. In Peru Alan García who wonderfully articulated his nationalist and anti-imperialist views caused the crisis of Peru's economy. During Garcia's five years of presidency from 1985-1990, Peru's economy achieved the highest inflation levels of the history of the country. Due to the policy of Garcia, millions of Peruvians were impoverished; millions moved from poverty into extreme level of poverty. Thus, populism of Alan García promised Peru greatness but in reality ran the country into poverty, high inflation and even more misery.

A key legacy of populism was in leadership style. The leader, irrespective whether he was in power or stayed abroad in exile, dominated his party. There could be internal struggles or conflicts within the party, but once they were settled by the leader, this became an unchangeable rule for the rest of the members. For example, in Peronist Party the role of caudillo was played by two men: Juan Perón and Carlos Menem. Within the Radical Party, on the other hand, every leader retained his style and continued to dominate even when his popularity faded. Thus, the authority and strong positions were preserved by the following members of the Radical party: Hipólito Yrigoyen, Marcelo T. de Alvear, Ricardo Balbín and Raúl Alfonsín. Even when the parties modernized their politics and adopted such attributes as conventions, the domination of their strong-willed leaders continued.

The common tendency that populist leaders relied on support of army inevitably led to the expansion of the political role of the military in Peru to a higher rate than in Argentina. As it has been already shown in the paper, Peruvian armed forces were involved in most of political conflicts, which evidenced the removal of the army from its normal professional responsibilities. This tendency was not abandoned by neo populists, for instance, Fujimori used military support in his presidential coup to ensure success of it. In addition, Fujimori's shadowy intelligence advisor implemented his considerable behind-the-scenes power while the presidential campaign. Thus, populism prompted the process of politicization of army. Dr. Kenneth Roberts in his work *Populism and Democracy in Latin America* pointed out that " A politicized military is necessarily a political actor that will be sought out by potential civilian allies and tempted to intervene on behalf of its own institutional or political interests." [20]

Thus, the main points of development of populism in Argentina and Peru can be summed up, compared and contrasted in the following way:

1. Populism was first used as a policy to gain support in Argentina.
2. Populism has been bipartisan.
3. Populism has existed in both democratic and undemocratic regimes. In the case of Argentina the ruling of Juan Peron in the mid of twentieth century was undemocratic, while Peru's leader Alan Garcia in the 1980s attempted to carry out populist policy together with the democracy
4. Commonly, populism was implemented by ambitious leaders to succeed in their political careers.

5. In both Argentina and Peru populism was successfully carried out by charismatic individuals who managed to appeal directly to the mass groups, for example, labor unions, the poor, and mobilize their political participation.

6. In both the countries the leaders who started the policy of populism promised to defend the interests of the “ common people” by giving them jobs. In return, the masses support the leaders with their votes and social mobilization. In other words, promises, rhetoric comfort and pompous words are the tools of populists for capturing trust and votes of the masses. As José María Velasco Ibarra, the Ecuadorian populist put it: “ Give me a balcony and the people are mine.”[21] As a rule, lofty promises of populism rarely come true, hurting by this most of the people that it claimed to represent.

7. Political careers of individual leaders built on populism always progress at the expense of economic growth of the country. Political leaders while fulfilling their lofty promised services roughly intrude into economic processes by implementing for example, expansionary monetary or fiscal policies, to produce an “ economic miracle” for a short period of time. Ultimately, artificially created fast progress and breaking basic economic principles and laws lead to economic collapse. Thus, the ambitions of populists always rebuff the well known truth that “ there is no free lunch.”

8. On the other hand, it would be wrong to conclude that populist governments always failed to manage economics. In the 1990s Argentine president Carlos Menem’s attempted to create a free market “ miracle” that totally eliminated the hyperinflation in the country’s for a short period of time. But Carlos Menem’s “ miracle” was grounded on the unsustainable

accumulation of public debt, which in 2001 sent Argentina's economy into a new depression.

9. In both Argentina and Peru military forces were involved into political conflicts, but Peruvian populism caused politicization of army.

10. Peron in Argentina was the first to use media as one more force of propaganda of populist ideology.

11. Methods and political styles of leadership varied in Argentina and Peru and improved with the progress of the movement. However, Argentinean Hipólito Yrigoyen built the mechanism of populism at the beginning of the century. Also, some gestures and approaches used in one country were repeated or imitated in the other, for example, the charity of Evita and María Delgado de Odría, ect.

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