

LATIN AMERICAN NEOPOPULISM

Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: how much affinity?

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ABSTRACT *This article assesses recent counter-intuitive arguments that political populism and economic liberalism have had unexpected affinities in contemporary Latin America. In this line of reasoning populist tactics have furthered the enactment of drastic market reform, while neoliberal attacks on established political and economic interests have strengthened the hand of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders. I defend these arguments against critical claims that neoliberalism is by nature exclusionary and therefore unpopular, foreclosing any opportunity for populist politics. Contrary to these claims, neoliberal neopopulism has significant inclusionary features as well. Undeniably, however, the postulated affinities were especially strong during the initial, bold phase of market reform, when neoliberalism offered a politically promising recipe for quickly confronting acute economic crises and thus proving the charisma of populist leaders. As stabilisation succeeds and crises ease, the main task turns from imposing bold reforms to reliably administering the institutional rules of the new development model. Personalistic plebiscitarian leaders are less well suited to this task and the alliance between neoliberal experts and neopopulist leaders therefore tends to weaken. Yet external and internal constraints make stark deviations from market-orientated economic policies unlikely, and deep economic crises and neopopulist experiences have weakened the organisational infrastructure of democracy in many countries, allowing for the rise of new personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. In the foreseeable future, neoliberalism and neopopulism are therefore likely to co-exist with considerable frequency in the region.*

Has Latin American populism lost its political viability in the age of neoliberalism? Do the pressures and constraints emerging from economic globalisation, such as the need for continued budget austerity, make populist politics infeasible by depriving leaders of the socioeconomic resources required for maintaining high popularity and preserving their precarious support? Or have Latin America's personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders flexibly adapted to these economic pressures and constraints, changing their economic policy approach in

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line with the realities of globalisation? Have neoliberal adjustment and market-orientated economic policies in fact given them some unexpected opportunities for enhancing their popularity and support? Has Latin American populism displayed its notorious opportunism (Lambert, 1969: 204, 208) as a new crop of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders has embraced free-market policies that the region's classical populists—such as Argentina's Juan Perón and Brazil's Getúlio Vargas—shunned? Have populist leaders transformed the content of their economic and social policy approach precisely in order to maintain the basic features of populist politics?

These questions are of considerable theoretical and practical significance, and they have stimulated a lively and controversial debate. Populism has been a crucial strand of Latin American politics for about a century. Furthermore, there is widespread consensus that a number of classical populists, especially Perón, Vargas and Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas, played a tremendously important role by reorienting and stimulating the economic and political development of their countries; among present-day personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders, Peru's Alberto Fujimori, Argentina's Carlos Menem and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez may end up having a similarly profound impact. Given its potential repercussions, it is important to investigate whether populism will continue to emerge frequently in the region or whether this chapter of Latin America's contemporary history has been closed.

If populism is likely to persist or re-emerge in contemporary Latin America, then its relationship to neoliberalism is a particularly important topic for examination. Economists, in particular, have depicted populism, with its (allegedly) whimsical and irresponsible approach to economic decision making, as diametrically opposed to the discipline required by market-orientated policies (see especially Sachs, 1989; Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991). These authors see the persistence of populism as an unequivocal threat to Latin America's new development model. By contrast, some authors have advanced the counter-intuitive and controversial argument that a number of new personalistic and plebiscitarian leaders has adapted to the constraints of neoliberalism and discovered that it actually opens up some promising opportunities for populist politics. These authors claim that populism and neoliberalism are compatible and even have some unexpected affinities (see especially Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1996; 1999). Given the current concern about the political sustainability of the new market model in Latin America, this issue is of tremendous theoretical and practical significance.

The question of the relationship of populism and neoliberalism is also of deeper theoretical significance. First, it has obvious implications for the concept and theory of populism. Authors who see an incompatibility between populism and neoliberalism tend to define populism more in substantive terms, emphasising the economic and social content of populist policies and/or the meaning of populism for the relations among different classes in society. By contrast, authors who see populism and neoliberalism as compatible draw the links between populist politics and such substantive aspects in a much looser fashion (Roberts, 1995) or define populism in purely political terms (Knight, 1998; Weyland, 2001).

The controversy emerging from these conceptual debates (for overviews, see Viguera, 1993; 2000) speaks to an even more basic issue, namely the question of the autonomy of politics. Is a political strategy—such as populism—tied or closely linked to specific socioeconomic policies or class bases of support, or can it emerge and prosper in a variety of socioeconomic settings? How dependent is a political strategy on a specific socioeconomic context? The conceptual and theoretical debate about contemporary Latin American populism, which at first sight may appear abstruse, thus speaks to major theoretical and practical issues. Answers to the questions just listed have crucial implications for the political and economic future of Latin America and for important issues in the social sciences.

For pragmatic reasons the present article applies a political definition of populism. The usage of a narrowly political concept leaves populism's relationship with socioeconomic policy approaches—such as neoliberalism—open to empirical investigation, rather than settling it by definitional fiat. Therefore, I follow Weyland (2001: 14) in defining populism 'as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers'. While the predominant usage of this strategy turns a leader into a full-scale populist,¹ politicians who approximate populism, yet combine it with other political strategies can be said to apply elements of populism, in the spirit of Ragin's (2000: chs 6–7) innovative discussion of gradated concepts. Detecting such elements of populism is especially significant in institutional settings—especially institutionalised party systems—that are not propitious to the emergence of full-scale populism. Finding elements of populism in such 'least likely cases'—such as Chile—strengthens arguments about the re-emergence of populism in contemporary Latin America and allows for a more wide-ranging analysis of the relationship between populism and neoliberalism.

Synergies and affinities between neoliberalism and neopopulism

The claims that neoliberalism and populism are compatible and may even have affinities emerged essentially from empirical observations. Two lines of scholarly writings provided crucial inspiration. The first group of pieces, such as Perruci and Sanderson (1989), Sanborn (1991), Castro Rea *et al* (1992: 126) and De la Torre (2000, 5–8), questioned the connections between Latin American populism and specific socioeconomic factors, including stage of development and specific social support base. By de-linking the concept from its presumed socioeconomic context, they opened up the way to exploring its potential connections to a seemingly un-populist economic policy approach like neoliberalism. A second group of pieces pointed to aspects of the political strategy, social support base, or social policy approach of market-orientated political leaders that looked surprisingly similar to populism. Their authors, such as Dresser (1991), Balbi (1992), and Singer (1990), interpreted observable facts in new and innovative ways. Furthermore, a number of authors debated whether Argentina's Menem was still a populist when he enacted market reform (Borón *et al*, 1995; Nun, 1994; Adelman, 1994; Sidicaro & Mayer, 1995; Novaro, 1994; 1995; Palermo, 1998). Based on these and similar observations (eg Bresser Pereira, 1991; Degregori &

Grompone 1991), other authors began to explore the connections between neoliberalism and neopopulism (see especially Castro Rea *et al*, 1992: 138, 140, 145; Knight, 1992; Martuccelli & Svampa, 1992; Ducatenzeiler *et al*, 1993; Leaman, 1994).

All these experiences and some of these writings inspired the more systematic and broadly framed arguments about the compatibility of populism and neoliberalism advanced by Roberts (1995) and Weyland (1996; 1999). Their core claim is that the unexpected combination of populism and neoliberalism is not merely the result of accidental circumstances, such as IMF pressures forcing populist presidents to enact drastic market reform. Instead, there are some underlying affinities that make neoliberalism and contemporary populism coincide in important, inherent ways. In particular, populism in general is a political strategy with low levels of institutionalisation, and the neopopulism emerging in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s often had a clearly anti-organisational bent as personalistic leaders garnered plebiscitarian support in societies where some organisations already existed and organisational loyalties therefore made some sectors of the population less susceptible to new populist mobilisation (Weyland, 2001: 14–16). Thus, to win mass backing, these new leaders disproportionately targeted the largely unorganised poor who were not members of pre-existing organisations, and they bypassed and marginalised those organisations. This anti-organisational bent of neopopulism is shared by neoliberalism, which seeks to protect the market from interference by special interests and rent-seeking groups. Thus, in their conceptions of democracy, both neopopulism and neoliberalism privilege numbers over special weight as political resources. The undifferentiated mass of ‘the people’ following the leader is akin to the unstructured market. As populism wants to protect the unity of the people against politicking factions and selfish elites, so neoliberalism seeks to protect the equilibrium of the market against the machinations of mercantilistic rent seekers. Since in political reality such factions and special interests always exist, neopopulism and neoliberalism share an anti-status-quo orientation, an anti-elite discourse, and a transformatory stance.

To effect such a transformation, neoliberalism needs to rely on concentrated political power. Paradoxically, the advocates of the market therefore use the state in order to push through reform against opposition (Kahler, 1990). And they ally with neopopulist leaders, who seek to boost their own autonomy and power and who thus wield the influence required for promoting the change that neoliberal experts and the international financial institutions seek. In fact, neopopulist leaders can use market reform to give their own power hunger a rational, modern justification.

Neopopulists and neoliberals also coincide considerably in their relationship to major sociopolitical actors. They maintain distance from trade unions, professional associations and even many organised business groups, which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders see as fetters on their autonomy and power and which neoliberal experts condemn as rent-seeking ‘special interests’ who seek to interfere with the market. By contrast, neopopulist leaders appeal for support especially to the largely unorganised informal sector and the rural poor, and neoliberal reformers and the international financial institutions benefit these

sectors with targeted social emergency and anti-poverty programmes. Neopopulist leaders eagerly use these new benefit schemes to strengthen their mass support. In sum, neopopulism and neoliberalism have a number of synergies and affinities.

The analytical utility of the synergy and affinity arguments

These arguments about synergies and affinities of neopopulism and neoliberalism in contemporary Latin America are crucial to understanding important phenomena that would otherwise remain puzzling. In particular they help explain the stunning political success of important market reformers such as Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and they also shed light on the eventual political failure of those leaders.

Established theories—both theories of populism and more general theories of Latin American politics—expected that most democratically elected presidents who enacted drastic economic adjustment and initiated bold and comprehensive market reform programmes would go the way of Brazil's Fernando Collor and Ecuador's Abdalá Bucaram: because of the tremendous social costs of neoliberalism, they would quickly lose support and be removed from office for one reason or another. In this view neoliberalism is deeply unpopular and therefore politically unviable outside a non-electoral, authoritarian regime. Only a dictator like Chile's Augusto Pinochet can impose neoliberalism.

Surprisingly, however, both Menem and Fujimori made great headway in enacting profound market reforms under democratic conditions; even Fujimori advanced quite far before his self-coup of April 1992. And while both presidents, especially Fujimori, resorted to autocratic, para-constitutional or blatantly unconstitutional means, they also found widespread electoral support for their actions in reasonably free and open contests. In fact, Fujimori's most undemocratic act—the closing of Congress in April 1992—elicited the highest level of popular support. Thus, while taking office under extremely adverse conditions—namely, virtual economic meltdown and sociopolitical chaos—both presidents garnered striking levels of political support, which allowed them to attain tremendous political success, especially democratic re-election in 1995. For almost 10 years both presidents dominated the political scene of their countries. Who would have foreseen this success, especially in the case of Fujimori, who took office in 1990 in an exceedingly precarious position, lacking any stable base of support, organised backing, or team of advisors?

The arguments advanced in the preceding section are crucial to understanding this stunning political success. Drastic market reform gave Menem and Fujimori many useful instruments for strengthening their own political position and undermining their adversaries. The very fact that, finally, a leader had the courage to attack the crisis head-on and thus deliver the country from hyperinflation demonstrated and reinforced his charisma and boosted his support. Despite the significant transitional costs, the restoration of minimal economic stability ended the great losses that hyperinflation imposed on the population, especially the poorer sectors. By making daily life again predictable, Menem and Fujimori gave people tranquillity. And, as growth returned, the two presidents won the

opportunity to institute targeted anti-poverty programmes with which they could strengthen their mass support. Given the limited aggregate cost, these programmes were acceptable to neoliberals, who saw them as a useful means of enhancing the political sustainability of the new development model. International financial agencies, who pushed hard for neoliberal reforms, therefore footed a good part of the bill for these social emergency programmes. Thus, market reform proved surprisingly useful for boosting the mass support of its successful initiators, allowing them to strengthen their populist leadership.

Also, a number of neoliberal reforms altered the balance of influence among sociopolitical sectors in a way that favoured neopopulist presidents. Some measures enabled Menem and Fujimori to strengthen their backing. Most importantly, the privatisation of public enterprises gave these presidents an opportunity to benefit powerful business sectors (Corrales, 1998; Schamis, 1999). At the same time neoliberal economics allowed Menem and Fujimori to put pressure on their adversaries and keep them off balance. For instance, the fiscal necessity to shrink the state enabled them to dismiss the cronies of their predecessors, and the flexibilisation of labour markets weakened trade unions, diminishing their capacity to hem in presidential autonomy and power with strikes and protests. Without invoking these unexpected synergies between neoliberal measures and populist tactics, it would be difficult to account for the unusual political and electoral success of market reformers Menem and Fujimori.

Furthermore, these synergy arguments are also useful for explaining the eventual downfall of these two leaders, as evidenced by Menem's incapacity to win a second consecutive re-election and by the surprising collapse of the Fujimori government shortly after it accomplished that feat. The synergy of neoliberalism and neopopulism was significantly stronger in the initial, radical phase of market reform than after the stabilisation of the economy, when the consolidation of the new development model acquired ever greater salience. When the country confronted a deep open crisis and neoliberals prescribed the shock therapy of drastic market reform, they relied on the boldness and transgressive tendencies of neopopulist leaders to carry out this plan of action. Personalistic plebiscitarian leaders concentrate power and display limited respect for institutional rules, and these tendencies proved highly 'functional' for the destruction of the old development model and the enactment of market reform. But as the crisis eased and as large parts of the market reform programme had been implemented, the principal task in the eyes of neoliberals shifted to the faithful administration and institutional solidification of the new development model. For this task the transgressive tendencies of neopopulist leaders that had come in so handy in the initial phase of transformation now appeared as problems and threats to the consolidation of the market system. As a result, there was more and more tension between neopopulist presidents and their neoliberal advisors, as demonstrated by Fujimori's frequent changes of his economic team during the late 1990s.

A similar shift of priorities occurred among the population. Precisely as neopopulist leaders succeeded in ending the deep initial crisis, problems such as inflation diminished in salience, and ever larger sectors directed their attention to other concerns, such as growth and employment (on Fujimori, see

Weyland, 2000). Unfortunately for neopopulist leaders, while neoliberalism offers promising (albeit costly) recipes for quickly ending hyperinflation, it does not provide similarly magical solutions for stimulating growth and employment. The main recommendation of market reformers—namely, to boost exports—takes time to produce results. In fact, as adjustment commonly causes recessions and as the shrinking of the state augments unemployment, neoliberalism often exacerbates precisely those problems that more and more people tend to focus on. Thus, the same economic policy approach that helped neoliberal neopopulists to win sky-high popularity at the beginning of their terms tended to depress their popular support over time. Ironically, one of the main reasons for this gradual reduction of support was precisely the success that these presidents attained in overcoming the grave initial crisis.

The synergies of neoliberalism and neopopulism help explain the paradoxical twists and turns in the political fate of important political leaders in contemporary Latin America. They are crucial to accounting for the initial success of presidents such as Menem and Fujimori as well as for their eventual failure. If the wave of market reform indeed constitutes a new ‘critical juncture’ for the region (cf Collier & Collier 1991), it is particularly important to understand its political preconditions and concomitants thoroughly. The arguments advanced by Roberts (1995) and Weyland (1996, 1999) elucidated these new phenomena, which were puzzling in light of old theories. In subsequent years a number of authors advanced along similar lines, often influenced by those arguments (Armony, 2000; Barr, 2003; Conniff, 1999; Coslovsky, 2002; Demmers *et al*, 2001; Kay, 1996; Oxhorn, 1998; Panfichi & Sanborn, 1995; Panizza, 2000; Philip, 1998).

The deficiency of counter-arguments

The arguments about synergies and affinities between neoliberalism and neopopulism have drawn withering criticism, especially from some Latin American scholars. While many of these criticisms take aim at the broader concept of (neo)populism that Roberts (1995) and Weyland (1996; 1999; 2001) developed and applied, they arise from the refusal of these authors to classify personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders such as Fujimori and Menem who enact neoliberal programmes as true populists (Nun, 1994; Adelman, 1994; Quijano, 1998; Lynch, 1999; Grompone, 1998; Vilas, 1995). These variegated—and sometimes vehement (eg Lynch, 1999)—objections advance two central points.

First, in a similar vein to Drake’s (1991) bait-and-switch interpretation of contemporary Latin American populism, some authors argue that a number of presidential candidates campaigned on populist platforms, but abandoned populist discourse and tactics immediately after winning the election, as they had to embrace neoliberalism (Nun, 1994: 107, 109; see also Adelman, 1994). Because these authors see populism as incompatible with neoliberalism, they claim that strong external and domestic pressure for neoliberalism induced the presidents-elect to give up populism. Populism is useful for garnering votes and winning the election but, after the election, the mass populace has little political influence, whereas domestic and foreign business sectors and the international financial institutions have decisive clout, given their contribution to the economic success

of the new government. Therefore, 'bait and switch' is a structural necessity.

This claim is half-correct in an obvious and undisputed fashion, but half-wrong in a surprising and decisive way. On the one hand, it is true that during their campaigns Fujimori and Menem seemed to advocate economic and social policies similar to those enacted by classical populists; in particular, they promised not to enact orthodox shock programmes. But after winning the contest they suddenly converted to neoliberalism. Thus, they performed a significant switch in substantive policy orientation. There is consensus on this side of the bait-and-switch interpretation.

However, this interpretation is incorrect with respect to political style and strategy. Fujimori, Menem and other neopopulist leaders such as Collor did maintain the populist political strategy that they had used in their electoral campaigns. They kept basing their government on a seemingly direct connection to their largely unorganised mass base; bypassing established parties and interest organisations; attacking the political class and other established elites; using opinion polls, (the threat of) plebiscites, and other populist instruments for overcoming opposition; strengthening their personalistic leadership; concentrating power and reinforcing the majoritarian elements of constitutional arrangements; and transgressing liberal political norms and trampling on institutional rules. Thus these leaders kept applying all the typically populist tools, tactics and strategies (Bresser Pereira, 1991; Novaro, 1994). Therefore, while there was a significant shift in substantive policy orientation, there was striking continuity in political style and strategy. Accordingly, these presidents remained political populists while enacting neoliberal programmes. They were neoliberal populists. And contrary to the leftist conjecture—and hope—that the people would reject neoliberalism, economically successful neoliberal populists such as Menem and Fujimori attained stunning levels of popularity for years. The critics' syllogism that neoliberals cannot be populists because they are necessarily unpopular proved clearly invalid.

The bait-and-switch interpretation does not hold true in the sphere of politics, which is arguably central to Latin American populism. Given the notorious opportunism of populist leaders and their lack of firm commitment to ideologies and programmes (Lambert, 1969: 204, 208), the common element of populist experiences in the region is the leader's insatiable quest for power. Populist leaders are thoroughly political animals. The continuity in political strategy is therefore much more crucial to understanding Latin American populism than the switch in policy approach. The bait-and-switch interpretation focuses on ultimately accidental aspects, whereas the arguments about neoliberal populism do justice to the core—ie the 'essence'—of Latin American populism (Weyland, 2001: 11).

The second main line of criticism admits that neoliberal populists such as Menem and Fujimori may well have used some of the political instruments and tactics applied by classical populists, but that neoliberal populism lacks one decisive feature of classical populism: classical populism went hand in hand with social democratisation, that is, the incorporation of previously excluded sectors of the population into political and social life (Lynch, 1999; Quijano, 1998: 183; Vilas, 1995: 32, 37, 41). While many classical populists were not politically democratic, they promoted the inclusion of newly rising sectors, especially the

working class. For instance, Perón, Vargas and Cárdenas stimulated the formation of trade unions; extended ample social benefits to workers; and politically mobilised sectors that had played a marginal role in national life before. While not participating in politics with full autonomy, these newly included sectors played a decisive role in the fate of populist leaders, as, for example, the experience of 17 October 1945 in Argentina shows. By contrast, the critics claim, leaders such as Menem, Fujimori and Collor demobilised the masses by weakening established intermediary organisations and by using TV to reach their followers, thus appealing to them as passive consumers, not active participants. At the same time, these leaders pursued policies that are said to concentrate wealth in the hands of the few and cut socioeconomic benefits for the many. Thus, whereas the policies pursued by classical populism were inclusionary, neoliberalism is depicted as exclusionary. Classical populists broadened the public sphere, whereas neoliberal leaders are said to shrink it through different forms of privatisation, de-politicisation and demobilisation.

In fact, however, there is not nearly such a stark contrast between classical populists and contemporary personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders who enact neoliberalism. First, the leftist critics depict the classical populists in a surprisingly and excessively positive light. While these leaders did mobilise substantial sectors of the population who had previously been excluded, they did so in a top-down fashion that sought plebiscitarian acclamation, not authentic, autonomous participation or liberal representation. These sectors did gain some level of participation, but it is questionable how much real voice that gave them. Furthermore, while classical populists did extend important social benefits to certain sectors and fostered their organisational incorporation, most of them kept other segments of the population excluded. Most of Latin America's populists of the 1930s to 1960s focused on urban sectors, neglecting most of the rural population. And in urban areas they privileged the working and lower middle class in the formal sector, extending few benefits to the informal sector. Classical populists benefited the lower-middle and middle deciles in Latin America's steep social pyramid, not the poorest sectors. In fact, the economic policies pursued by classical populists may well have hurt the material well-being of many poorer people (Cardoso & Helwege, 1991). And social redistribution to the lower-middle and middle rungs of the social pyramid may have made redistribution to the poorest segments even harder. In their sudden and problematic nostalgia for classical populism, the leftist critics may well overestimate the extent of social democratisation that the personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders of the 1930s to 1960s brought about.

At the same time these critics clearly exaggerate the exclusionary features of neoliberal populism. In fact, neoliberal neopopulists also promoted significant social democratisation by appealing disproportionately to the poor in the informal sector; by extending governmental recognition and social benefits to these long-neglected segments; and by pursuing some elite turnover in government and state institutions. Interestingly, these claims apply especially to Alberto Fujimori, on whom many of the critics focus (Lynch, 1999; Grompone, 1998; Quijano, 1998; Murakami, 2002).

Fujimori's political rise depended on the effort of newly emerging sectors of the

population to achieve greater social and political participation.² In particular, rising segments of Peru's informal sector—such as the entrepreneurial groups led by Fujimori's first vice-president Máximo San Román—backed Fujimori. Also, darker-skinned Peruvians of indigenous ancestry (*cholos*) and with provincial backgrounds disproportionately supported Fujimori in opposition to his lily-white, aristocratic, cosmopolitan adversary Mario Vargas Llosa (Degregori & Grompone, 1991). Fernando Collor was also catapulted to the presidency by support from Brazil's urban informal sector and rural poor. His meteoric rise and surprising presidential victory demonstrated to Brazil's political class that these sectors were crucial to the outcome of presidential contests. Thus Collor's victory had a lasting impact in proving the political clout of the mass citizenry. It was an important step towards the political incorporation of these segments, many of whom had gained the right to vote only with the lifting of literacy requirements in 1985.

Once elected, neopopulist leaders, especially Fujimori, effected some social democratisation by promoting elite turnover. To displace the well entrenched white Lima elite, Peru's neopopulist president deliberately drafted for his electoral vehicle 'Nueva Mayoría' in 1992–93 provincial professionals who lacked a political background and thus did not belong to the established 'political class'. In his nominations and appointments to congressional, governmental, and administrative positions he privileged sectors that had been marginal to the national elite, such as Peruvians of Asian descent. Similarly, Fujimori—like Collor and Menem—disproportionately promoted women into the political and governmental elite.³ And the president and his most trusted underlings sought to forge a new bureaucratic cadre by recruiting well trained experts who had lower-middle class backgrounds, had gone to public schools (not the expensive and exclusive private schools), and also lacked political experience. In these ways this neoliberal populist weakened distinctions of status and overcame barriers of discrimination. This 'lifting' of relatively marginal people is a typical populist tactic. Since these individuals lack independent bases of power, they owe their ascent to the personalistic leader, who can also dispose of them at will. The leader's quest for concentrated political power contributed to these significant steps towards a social democratisation of Peru's governing elite.

Much less is known about elite turnover under other neoliberal populists. Impressionistic evidence suggests that Collor and Menem also promoted people who would not have risen under other governments, such as provincial cronies. Critics poked fun at Collor's 'República de Alagoas' and Menem's hillbillies from La Rioja, who seemed out of place in Brasília and, especially, in sophisticated Buenos Aires. For instance, Menem's confidant Antonio Erman González did not seem to have the stature to exercise the important governmental responsibilities with which Menem entrusted him, such as the Economy and Defence Ministries. But it is unclear to what extent Collor's and Menem's elite renovation went beyond the promotion of a group of personal aides to affect important echelons of the governmental apparatus. Empirical investigations of this topic could make a significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary populism in Latin America.

Fujimori, in particular, but other neoliberal populists as well, also promoted social democratisation in his relationship to his mass base. From 1992 onwards

he instituted extensive social emergency programmes which gave long-neglected sectors of the population, especially the urban and rural poor, significant access to government benefits. A massive programme of building schools and health posts; of improving roads and productive infrastructure, such as irrigation systems; and of carrying out a host of productivity-enhancing projects spread socioeconomic benefits to groups that had previously been largely excluded. In addition to the distribution of material resources, Fujimori's programmes also brought these people governmental recognition. In particular, the president himself paid innumerable visits to the marginal zones of cities and the outlying parts of the country in order to have personal contact with people, celebrate their cultural traditions (for instance, by wearing local clothing), and thus give them a sense of recognition and belonging to a national community. While these contacts were fleeting and one may question the wisdom of some of Fujimori's social programmes, such as the single-minded emphasis on school construction, they seem to have been important to many people, for material and symbolic reasons. Above all, for the first time a president was paying attention to them.

While Fujimori's popular mass base was the object of government programmes, it was also a subject of participation that had some type of voice. First, some of the social programmes instituted by the president—especially the projects administered by the social emergency fund FONCODES—were demand-based; the initiative for proposing projects lay with the potential beneficiaries, not the government. Specifically, popular groups were asked to rank their needs and thus define their own priorities. While this bottom-up approach was often short-circuited by promoters sent from the centre and while it did not exclude governmental discretion and political manipulation of these social programmes, it did give people more voice than traditional handouts, including many of the social programmes created by classical populists.

Second, a larger cross-section of the population had significant political voice under neoliberal populism than under classical populism. Certainly, their political role did not entail the subjective experiences of participation that occurred during the demonstrations and mass meetings organised by classical populists, such as the mythical *concentraciones* in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo or Mexico City's Zócalo. While those collective forms of plebiscitarian acclamation have fallen from fashion, a more scientific form of gauging 'the will of the people' has spread that gives neoliberal populism more accountability and responsiveness than classical populism ever had: the opinion poll. Latin America's contemporary populists are addicted to these surveys, which demonstrate whether they are 'in touch' with the people. While it is unclear to what extent governmental decision making follows poll results, there are some striking instances in which it did. For instance, Argentina's Menem commissioned a poll to gauge popular views on pension reform, especially the proper mix of the private and public sector, and followed the results of this survey (Demarco, 2004: 90). Poll results also have significant repercussions for the political fate of governments. For instance, Collor's low standing in public opinion by early 1992 left him vulnerable to accusations of corruption, while Menem, who commanded more popular support, managed to survive similar accusations in early 1991.⁴ At a time when Latin America's presidential systems are losing their strict rigidity and when many

countries have experimented with innovative forms of removing sitting presidents in a more-or-less para-constitutional fashion, chief executives in general and populist leaders in particular need to be concerned about their standing in the polls. Through this new form of statistical representation the popular masses have considerable impact on the fate of contemporary personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders.

The frequent usage of polls systematically extends the range of citizens who have (statistical) voice and influence beyond those working- and lower-middle class sectors who were the core constituencies of classical populism. While the samples of many polls suffer from significant limitations in territorial and social scope, they are substantially more representative of the total population than the organised mass rallies of classical populism. And since they tap people's views under the cover of anonymity, they usually solicit significantly more authentic expressions of citizens' views than the orchestrated collective demonstrations of classical populism. In particular, the opposition, which classical populism often sought to silence through the use of mob squads, has free and equal voice in surveys.⁵ Last but not least, in most Latin American countries, there is a multiplicity of survey institutes, and their results are published by a variety of news outlets. Thus, while the government may be tempted to commission manipulated surveys in order to fool the public about the extent of its support, credible alternative surveys will soon deflate these lies. And while pollsters in several countries have political connections that may detract from their objectivity, the wealth of surveys that are conducted in contemporary Latin America provides a useful corrective. By contrast, governments tend to have disproportionate influence on mobilising people for collective demonstrations. Therefore, while polls may well be skewed and not reach perfect objectivity, they tend to be much less skewed in a minimally pluralistic setting than the main forms of participation employed by classical populism. While not providing people with much of a subjective experience of participation (as the mass rallies of classical populists did), the survey instruments applied by neopopulists—including neoliberal populists—keep contemporary personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders more accountable and responsive to 'the people' than their predecessors ever were.

In sum, the critics of the concept of 'neoliberal populism' exaggerate both the inclusionary features of classical populism and the exclusionary characteristics of its present-day neoliberal variant. Like the older generation of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders in Latin America, the contemporary incarnations have effected significant social democratisation—not to speak of their greater compliance with the political norms of democracy. The objections to the classification of leaders like Fujimori, Menem, Collor and Bucaram as populists that authors such as Lynch, Quijano and Murakami advance are unpersuasive.

The changing face of neoliberal populism: from bold reform to the pragmatic administration of 'the model'

As the second section of this article has shown, the arguments about affinities between neopopulism and neoliberalism were derived from the political experience of orthodox shock plans and the initiation of drastic market-oriented

reform. During this early, 'heroic', boldly transformatory phase of neoliberalism, the synergies with personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership were particularly pronounced. Neopopulists rose as outsiders attacking the established political class and other special interests and appealing to segments of the population that felt left out, especially people in the informal sector. Similarly, neoliberal experts sought to transform the status quo, concentrating their fire on the government officials, politicians, and 'rent-seeking' interest groups that were interfering in the market. And where they sought to gain a mass backing, they extolled the informal sector, which lacked access to political influence and therefore, in their view, was playing by the rules of market competition (see especially De Soto, 1989). Thus, during this 'revolutionary' phase of neoliberalism, its lines of confrontation and support overlapped closely with those of neopopulism.

During the initial stages of radical reform, the political strategies and institutional instruments of neoliberalism and neopopulism also coincided. Personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders by nature seek to concentrate power. When they serve as presidents of complex states, they therefore seek to strengthen the institutional apex of the state and to skew the separation of powers so as to privilege the executive branch over congress and the judiciary and thus to attenuate checks and balances to their own authority. While neoliberals are in principle averse to a strong state, they paradoxically need such a strong state during the enactment of market reform in order to break resistance to the radical transformation they are promoting (Kahler, 1990). Therefore neoliberal experts and the international financial institutions initially accepted and supported the power grab of neopopulist leaders and in this way provided a modern, technical rationale for it.

Last but not least, the severe open crisis triggering the enactment of neoliberal shock programmes gave neopopulist leaders the opportunity to demonstrate and reinforce their charisma. By confronting head-on the deepening problems that their predecessors had failed to resolve, they displayed great courage and gave the suffering population the assurance that their new leader was prepared to make every effort to confront the crisis. In fact, the most pressing problem at that time, hyperinflation, was the type of difficulty that determined action, based on neoliberal recipes, was able to stop quickly. The bold neoliberal measures undertaken by neopopulist leaders did in fact bring relief by restoring minimal economic stability and thus guaranteeing the predictability that people need for planning their daily lives. This success, in turn, led to an outpouring of popular support, which strengthened the position of neopopulist leaders and allowed them to forge ahead with ambitious market reforms (Weyland, 2002a: chs 5–6).

Over time, however, this very success slowly eroded popular support for neopopulist leaders and their market reform agenda. As the most pressing problem gradually faded away into memory, personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders faced greater difficulty in justifying their bold leadership. As people shifted their attention to other issues, they came to focus on problems such as poverty and unemployment that neopopulist leaders could not easily resolve. In particular, while neoliberalism had offered a promising blueprint for extinguishing hyperinflation, its insistence on continued budget austerity and its warnings against overheating the economy hindered any determined effort to boost growth and

quickly create employment. Thus, the very success of neoliberal populists in ending the initial crisis came to weaken their political standing over time and to cause a growing tension and divergence between the political interests of neopopulist leaders and the economic discipline enforced by neoliberal experts and the international financial institutions.

The restoration of basic economic stability and the rapid advance of the market reform process also created an increasing divergence in the preferred political strategies of neoliberal experts and neopopulist leaders. As countries left the radical phase of neoliberalism behind and the main task shifted from the drastic, profound transformation of the status quo ante to the consolidation of the new development model and the pragmatic administration of the new status quo, neoliberal experts and the international financial institutions became less dependent on the transformatory boldness of neopopulist leaders. Whereas the transgressive tendencies of a Menem and Fujimori had been 'functional' in dismantling the old development model and pushing through painful reforms against significant opposition, they now came to be seen as obstacles to the institutional consolidation of the new development model. The concentrated political authority of neopopulist leaders, which had served so well for enacting reform, turned into a potential threat to the smooth functioning of the new market model. In the initial, heroic phase of market reform, neoliberal experts had taken advantage of—and perhaps even promoted—the para-constitutional manoeuvres of neopopulist leaders; but now they increasingly emphasised the need for respecting the rule of law, which limited the discretion of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders. In sum, the preferred political strategies of neopopulist leaders, on the one side, and of neoliberal experts and international financial institutions, on the other, came to diverge ever more.

Finally, with their very success in defeating the established political class and pushing through profound market reforms that not only overhauled the country's development model but also reshaped its politics, neopopulist leaders lost their main 'enemy'. To whip up mass support, populists seek to depict the world in 'us vs them' terms, emphasising the constitutive cleavage of politics (cf Schmitt, 1987). Their victory greatly diminished the importance of this cleavage. Further, neoliberalism, which had initially attacked established elites as well (especially the political class and rent-seeking, mercantilistic entrepreneurs), now prescribed favourable treatment of new elites, such as the foreign and domestic investors that the country had to attract in order to boost growth. For instance, many privatisation deals offered significant benefits to the buyers, who were therefore widely seen as receiving privileges. Thus, while neoliberalism and neopopulism had initially coincided in an anti-elite stance, neoliberalism now seemed to favour new elites, thus weakening popular support for neopopulist leaders.

At the same time the new market model was not producing the sustained prosperity that neoliberal experts and neopopulist leaders had promised and that many people were expecting. While neoliberal populists did extend new social benefits to poorer groups, especially in rural areas and the urban informal sector, other elements of the recently installed development model, such as its incapacity to create massive employment, disappointed popular hopes. In the eyes of more and more people neoliberalism was not providing sufficient benefits to the main

support base of neopopulist leaders, the informal sector. For these reasons the political appeals of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders—anti-elite, pro-poor—came to diverge from the economic realities of neoliberalism, which increasingly appeared as pro-elite and anti-poor. While objective facts—such as data on changes in levels of poverty and inequality (eg Morley, 2001: 23–25)—reveal these impressions as exaggerated or incorrect, these sentiments have a political reality of their own.

In sum, the synergies and affinities between neoliberalism and neopopulism, which were quite strong during the initial phase of shock treatment and bold market reform, became looser over time. As more and more tensions between these two poles emerged, the political position of the first generation of neoliberal neopopulists weakened. Even the most successful leaders, Menem and Fujimori, failed to perpetuate their power any further.

Was neoliberal populism therefore a fleeting phenomenon, viable only during the ‘revolutionary’ phase of neoliberalism? Now that this stage has passed, will populism and economic liberalism diverge ever more and soon form polar opposites again, as seemed to be the case during most of Latin American history? Will the next generation of Latin American populists follow the example of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, who rejects neoliberalism, promotes sociopolitical polarisation, and therefore faces opposition from very similar sectors to those that lined up against classical populists like Perón and Vargas (see Ellner & Hellinger, 2003; Hawkins, 2003)?

While growing popular criticism of neoliberalism has indeed increased support for non-neoliberal populists, the very failures of the Chávez government—most evident in economic policy—and the resulting eruption of serious turmoil and conflict have served as a clear deterrent to other Latin American leaders. For instance, Ecuador’s new president Lucio Gutiérrez, who has a similar personal, political and ideological background to his Venezuelan counterpart, has since the moment of his electoral victory made it clear that he will not follow Chávez’s path. Instead, while maintaining political populism, he has accepted the confines of Ecuador’s new market model—including the country’s tight convertibility scheme—and has sought good relations with the IMF, the worldwide guardian of neoliberal orthodoxy. As this case suggests, a mass defection of Latin America’s contemporary populist leaders from neoliberalism is unlikely. The bases of sustainability of the new market model are too strong to allow for such deviations (Weyland, 2002b).

In fact, most leaders whose political strategy relies on important elements of neopopulism—such as Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe (Dugas, 2003),⁶ Peru’s Alejandro Toledo (Barr, 2003), Mexico’s Vicente Fox (Mizrahi, 2003: ch 7), Bolivia’s Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada,⁷ and Chile’s Joaquín Lavín (Silva, 2001; Agüero, 2003)—accept the basic principles of neoliberalism. While they may try to soften the edges of the new development model and enhance its social face, they all (credibly promise to) comply with the demands of budget equilibrium, maintain and enhance trade openness and capital market liberalisation, promote further privatisation of public enterprises, and keep state interventionism limited. Thus Latin America’s contemporary populists continue to pursue a predominantly neoliberal policy orientation.

Given the diminished synergies between neoliberalism and neopopulism, the political position of these leaders is more precarious than that of Menem and Fujimori during the early to mid-1990s. For instance, because of his incapacity to fulfil his generous promises of socioeconomic benefits, the popularity of Peru's Alejandro Toledo quickly plummeted, prompting concerns that he may be forced out of office. And, only six months into his second term, an effort by Bolivia's Sánchez de Lozada to raise taxes, enhance fiscal stability and please the IMF triggered bloody riots that led to calls for his resignation. Thus neoliberalism now poses more obstacles to the political success of neopopulist leaders than it did in the early 1990s.

On the other hand, market reform also helped to pave the way for the emergence of these leaders by weakening intermediary organisations such as political parties and interest associations. Trade liberalisation and stiffer foreign competition as well as the deregulation of labour markets have permanently debilitated trade unions. The mass dismissal of public employees, privatisation of para-state enterprises, and elimination of many subsidies and controls have undermined patronage networks that underlay many parties. And the controversial debates about market reforms have torn asunder several long-established parties. In all these ways neoliberalism has loosened the institutional infrastructure of democracy (Hagopian, 1998; Oxhorn, 1999), creating more space for the emergence of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders. Thus, neoliberalism continues to make important contributions to the rise of neopopulism—and is likely to do so for years to come.

Furthermore, in the era of economic globalisation, market-orientated policies are a precondition for sustained economic success. As the experience of Chávez shows, defiance has disastrous results, especially for the poorer sectors, who are the mass base of many neopopulists. If contemporary personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders want to provide economic and social benefits to their core constituents, they have little choice but to play by the currently prevailing rules of the economic game. While the new development model does not produce the prosperity that neoliberal experts had promised, it offers the only realistic option for preventing countries from suffering the deterioration affecting present-day Venezuela. Realistically speaking, this model constitutes the best bet for neopopulist leaders.

Since the maintenance of the new development model's basic outline is a practical necessity for populist presidents in contemporary Latin America, these leaders have tended to emphasise a theme already advanced by Menem and Fujimori after the successful enactment of market reforms, namely the reconciliation of conflictive societies (Weyland, 2002a: 191–193). Personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders often promote the unity of the people by calling for an end to factional conflicts and ideological rifts. Since the market system has defeated its grand ideological rivals and since even most sectors of the left have accepted its basic principles, severe political polarisation has diminished in Latin America. Contemporary neoliberal populists seek to reinforce this 'end of ideology' by depicting as the main task of politics the pragmatic 'administration of things'. For instance, Chile's almost successful right-wing candidate Joaquín Lavín campaigned on a platform offering effective solutions for concrete problems

plaguing specific people, rather than proposing any grand vision (Silva, 2001; Agüero, 2003). Similarly, Colombia's Álvaro Uribe promised to get down to business and finally resolve the serious problems afflicting his country (Dugas, 2003). This pragmatic effort to focus on benefiting the people directly while refraining from ideological debates and—wherever possible—avoiding conflictual issues is similar to Fujimori's basic approach during his presidency. It holds clear appeal in societies that have long been rent by conflict, such as the cleavage between Peronists and anti-Peronists in Argentina, between the supporters of the military regime and the opposition (*Concertación*) in Chile, and between various ideological parties in Peru during the 1980s. Overcoming such 'factionalism' is a typical populist theme, and founding this new consensus on generalised acceptance of basic market principles is of interest to neoliberals. Thus there continue to be underlying affinities between neoliberalism and neopopulism in contemporary Latin America.

Despite this unity message, however, populist leaders like boosting their mass support by combating some 'enemy of the people'. While the first generation of neoliberal populists arose in response to the grave, hyperinflationary crisis confronting their countries in the late 1980s, the new leaders, who seek office at a time of reasonable economic stability, have emerged in opposition to specifically political challenges. Mexico's Vicente Fox and Peru's Alejandro Toledo demonstrated their courage by taking on decaying authoritarian regimes or autocratic leaders (Mizrahi, 2003; Barr, 2003). As presidents they have both sought to keep this threat awake. For instance, Fox has used revelations of corruption to put pressure on the old regime party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and Toledo has invested significant political and diplomatic capital in seeking the extradition of ex-president Fujimori from Japan. Especially in the case of Toledo, whose governmental performance has elicited severe criticism, this effort to prosecute his neoliberal populist predecessor looks partly like typical populist scapegoating—a diversionary tactic designed to divert attention from his own failings.

Colombia's Álvaro Uribe faced an even clearer enemy. He rose by taking a hard line against the brutal FARC guerrillas, who had extracted significant concessions from his hapless predecessor but had nevertheless refused to take any serious step toward ending armed violence. The growing revulsion against FARC among the population gave Uribe a great opportunity to rally mass support and demonstrate his courageous leadership (Dugas, 2003). Thus, while promoting the unity of the largest sectors of the population, the new crop of personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders takes advantage of political threats to boost their populist leadership. Given that Uribe faces the gravest threat from a small minority that is widely discredited in the eyes of the population, he has the best chance of these three presidents to gain significant, lasting mileage from this new front line.

Latin America's new generation of neoliberal populists faces a political-economic context that is less dangerous than that confronting the first wave of such leaders, but that is also less conducive to boosting their leadership and giving them a dominant political position, such as Menem and Fujimori enjoyed it in the early to mid-1990s. The grave crisis of the late 1980s created significant

risks of failure, as the case of Brazil's Collor shows. But it also allowed some leaders to turn adversity into advantage, boldly cut the Gordian Knot, reshape the political and institutional framework, and reign virtually supreme for years. The present situation of greater economic stability, yet volatile and, on average, mediocre growth has narrowed the probability distribution of potential outcomes. While neoliberal populists now face less danger of spectacular political failure,⁸ they also enjoy fewer opportunities to win political supremacy.⁹ While making Latin American politics less colourful, this 'normalization' of (neoliberal) populism is likely to have a salutary effect on the consolidation and quality of democracy in the region.

Conclusion

This article has extended the lively discussion on 'neoliberal populism' in Latin America in three ways. First, it has sought to demonstrate how this concept and its underlying theoretical ideas can account for important developments that other approaches leave unexplained. The stunning political success of Presidents Menem and Fujimori, in particular, came as a surprise to most observers. The unexpected synergies between neoliberalism and neopopulism are crucial to understanding this success. Interestingly, the same arguments also help explain the eventual decay of Menem's and Fujimori's leadership. Thus these arguments, which emerged from empirical observations, have a significant empirical pay-off.

Second, the article has sought to refute the criticisms advanced against these arguments by a number of authors. The claim that candidates campaign with populist tactics but then abandon populism upon taking office and enacting neoliberalism is not true as far as their political style, tactics and strategy are concerned. Instead, leaders like Menem, Fujimori and Collor kept using typically populist political tactics while in office, and the application of these tactics had a great impact on the political fate of these leaders. Furthermore, like classical populism, neoliberal populism also has significant inclusionary features. Certainly, it does not benefit the same sectors as classical populism did and therefore can be called exclusionary towards those sectors, especially organised formal-sector labour. But it does extend material benefits and symbolic recognition to the long-neglected poorest segments of the population. And it effects elite renovation by promoting provincial groups, middle- and lower-middle class sectors, under-represented ethnic segments, and women. Thus neoliberal populism also advances social democratisation. Furthermore, through opinion polls, it gives a much broader cross-section of the population a voice in public opinion and some influence on government decision making than did classical populism with its orchestrated mass rallies. And, of course, despite undeniable transgressions, neoliberal populists have played much more faithfully by the rules of the democratic game than leaders like Perón, Vargas and especially Cárdenas did (Dix, 1985). The claim that personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders who enact neoliberalism are exclusionary and therefore cannot be classified as populists is unconvincing.

Third, the article has used the arguments about neoliberal populism to shed light on the opportunities and problems facing contemporary leaders like Toledo,

Fox, Lavín and Uribe. With the end of the severe crises of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the synergies between neopopulism and neoliberalism have weakened, as the decline of Menem's and Fujimori's leadership have already shown. Furthermore, the mediocre economic performance of the new market model and the frequent need for new rounds of adjustment limit the resources that presidents can distribute to their mass followers. On the other hand, the widespread acceptance of the market model diminishes sharp political conflict and allows these leaders to gain support by 'unifying the people' and focusing on pragmatic solutions to concrete problems. Last but not least, political challenges—such as the spectre of Fujimori in contemporary Peru or the havoc wrought by FARC in Colombia—give some of these leaders good opportunities to boost their leadership by protecting the people from sinister enemies. As a result of all these tendencies neoliberal populism remains a viable strategy of rule in present-day Latin America.

Notes

- ¹ For the sake of stylistic variation, this article uses the terms 'populism' and 'personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership' interchangeably. Furthermore, since I follow Weyland (2001: 14–16) in seeing neopopulism as a 'classical subtype' of populism, I often use the phrase 'neoliberal populism' instead of the more precise, but cumbersome 'neoliberal neopopulism'.
- ² Interestingly, neopopulism emerged in several instances—especially in Brazil and Peru—right after the third wave of democratisation had lifted the long-standing literacy qualifications for voting and had thus brought universal suffrage. Neopopulists like García, Fujimori and Collor in fact drew disproportionate support from the poorest and least educated sectors, ie precisely the newly enfranchised groups.
- ³ See especially Blondet (2002). Like Fujimori, Menem passed a quota law designed to increase women's participation in electoral and congressional arenas. And Collor was the first Brazilian president to appoint a woman to the crucial post of finance minister.
- ⁴ Similarly, the drastic drop in Hugo Chávez's popularity ratings in the course of 2001 exposed this non-neoliberal populist to growing attacks from organised civil society that culminated in the coup attempt of April 2002.
- ⁵ Obviously, surveys do not exclude all forms of social pressure, such as the 'spirals of silence' analysed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. For an application of this idea to neoliberal populism see Conaghan's interesting analysis (1995).
- ⁶ While Dugas (2003) makes a convincing case that Uribe does not qualify as a full-scale populist, he mentions many elements of populism in the political strategy of Colombia's new president. In fact, this syndrome—ie the presence of several populist elements—is noteworthy, especially given that Colombia's political system had hitherto proven rather infertile ground for populist leadership. The same arguments apply to Agüero's (2003) analysis of Chile's Lavín.
- ⁷ On neoliberal populism under the first Goni government (1993–97), see the informative analysis in Paz Ballivián and Cevallos Rueda (2001: 158–170).
- ⁸ For a while Toledo emerged from the real danger zone as his popularity ratings gradually recovered from the low point of early to mid-2002.
- ⁹ Only Uribe faces this opportunity, should he manage to deal a strategic blow to the FARC guerrillas.

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