

How the Party System Influences Populism: a comparative analysis on India and Venezuela

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Abstract: *The relationship between the demise of traditional representative institutions and the eruption of new forms of populist leadership is added recently into the area of study on populism. The paper in this regard attempts to analyse how specific nature of party systems in India and Venezuela feeds distinguished pattern of populist mobilization and shapes outcomes in the two countries. Following shared colonial past and same set of state-led economic policies, both the countries face contrasting features of populism. Populist resurgence in Venezuela sets unique example among other developing countries by breaking down highly institutionalised party system in 90s. Instead, in India, the largest democracy in the world, a variety of populist mobilization from central to state level shows a tendency of "self-limiting in the domain of representative democracy" following the same decade. Our analysis shows that if party system fails to respond to new needs and demands of people in the changing social context, this drives a populist leader to go against partidocracia or dominating institutional apparatus. Both the cases most appropriately reveal that populism is influenced by the rational strategy of electoral victory and the incapacity of existing political institutions to incentivize the people and the leadership.*

Introduction:

Populism in its myriad forms manifests in divergent parts of the world and brings widely varied phenomena into the analysis of comparative politics ranging from regime types to party organisation, leadership, patterns of mobilisation and economic restructuring. Although the contested nature on its meaning, characteristics and significance puts obstacle toward a consensus on the concept, the analysis of comparative politics especially on developing world heavily cultivates analytical leverage from the concept due to its capability to encompass rich and multi-faceted phenomena.

Though there is a tendency in literatures to link populism with specific model or phase of economic development, i.e. statist versus market centric (Weyland 1996; Ayyangar 2007, 94), contemporary populism

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increasingly establishes its relative autonomy from such (Roberts 2003, 36). Instead, "there appears to be a dialectical relationship between *the demise of traditional representative institutions* and *the eruption of new forms of populist leadership*" (Roberts 2003, 36, italic added). That is, populist leader fixes the rational strategy of electoral victory on the basis of strength and weakness of existing institutional setting.

But the richness of the term is entrapped in elastic format and says little in individual case study. A comparative analysis instead captures specific institutional characteristics which contribute to the variation in the rise of populist movement and its outcome. The paper in this regard attempts to analyse how specific natures of institution in India and Venezuela incentivizes and accelerates distinguished pattern of populist mobilization and outcome in the two countries.

The paper loosely restricts its focus for populist mobilization within the duration of 1990s which is earmarked for the rise of religious and ethnic upsurge in India and of Hugo Chavez, the protagonist of economic populism in Venezuela, during economic restructuring. It posits on an understanding that party system evolves from the "interactions resulting from inter-party competition" (Sattori 1976, 44), resembles contextual features and, largely determines political-institutional pattern of a country and its political-shock absorbing capacity. This guides the paper to seek the influence of this variable on populism in India and Venezuela.

First part of the paper briefly maps the academic debate on populism and locates the paper's institutional understanding on it. Second part discusses the significance and justification of the two cases to be analysed and formulates the research question. Grounded on the discussion made in this part, the third offers a brief examination on party system in Venezuela and India. After the party system being unveiled in the third part, the fourth one goes to comparative analysis of its influence on populism and follows with the conclusion of the paper.

2.1 Mapping the debate on populism:

Among a plethora of conceptualisation, the classic account on it comes from the sociology of modernisation. Influenced by modernisation theory, Germani (1965) proposes functionalist explanation. Their classic approach though sheds the light on how the interaction of tradition and modernity of 60s grounds populist movement; it fails to account how the status-quo of man-made institutions ignites and incentivizes the populist actions rationally.

On structural claim, populism can be derived from people's choice as a direct function of their position in an exogenously given material landscape. Its proponents influence the explanation on the first wave of populist movement generally in developing regions during the primary stage of Import Substituting Industrialization (ISI). They relate this to the structural predicament embodied in pre-industrial and semi-feudal coercive system. But their exclusive focus on exogenous factors fails to explain the next wave of neo-populist revival which is prominently fed by endogenous institutional impediments and incentive patterns.

On contemporary populism, a strong constructivist explanation is offered by Canovan (1999) and later extended by Laclau (2005). Relying on "a-rational" interpretation of the events (Parsons 2007, 131), they claim that populism is rooted in the ever-present phenomena of the power structure and the gap between the 'pragmatic' and the 'redemptive' components of democracy. For them, populist leaders capitalize the perception of the people "against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (Canovan 1999, 3). With some validity, not only does this claim tend to capture the populist movement as a simplified overlapping phenomenon with politics, but also misses rational and particularistic dimension of populism.

2.2. Institutional account:

Against those major theoretical contributions, institutional account provides a more nuanced understanding on populist mobilization by subsuming it to *rational action of human being as a function of their position* in man-made domain. This claim is *particularistic* in the sense that any definition of populism is not manifested until people create new causal dynamics through their own course of actions (Parsons 2007, 14). On the second wave of populism, the *man-made structures* are identified as post war frustration, rise of liberal democracy and economic development (Zaslove 2008, 319; Weyland 1999, 2003). Institutional account points out that the dispossessed mass, being delinked from formal party organisation, provides "an untapped electoral market" with a demand for more socio-economic benefits (Roberts 2006, 134) to the resentive elites to vehicle them by organic, labour, partisan or electoral mobilization (Robert 2006).

3. Populism in India and Venezuela: the research question:

Populist resurgence in Venezuela considers unique attention among other

examples in the Latin American(LA) countries exclusively for the reason that populism brings party system breakdown in the country which was identified as strong and highly institutionalised (Roberts 2003, 35). In tandem with its distinctive feature of gearing “the institutional decomposition of the old order”, populist mobilization led by Hugo Chavez brings forth the practice of economic populism in politics and policies. Chavezian populism proves the retaining capacity of “more traditional statist and nationalist variants of populism” against a dense demonstration of “unexpected affinities” between neoliberal economic restructuring, an ‘atomized’ social setting and populist political leadership (Weyland 1996, Roberts 1995, Roberts 2003, 36). In the decade of 90s he grounded the political base by streamlining the demands of economically oppressed mass and manifested populist economic policies by ignoring adverse economic effects of such.

On the other hand, in India, the largest democracy in the world, a variety of populist mobilization from central to state level emerged especially during the same decade in 1990s, shows a tendency of “self-limiting in the domain of representative democracy” (Muralidharan 1998, 317). Contrasting to Venezuela, Indian populist movement does not enforce anti-institutional decomposing elements in politics and anti-neoliberal manifestation in economic policies. But the possibility of distortion was not less in Indian case than in Venezuela. A joint concert of populist rhetoric with highly regressive reality which is rooted in higher socioeconomic inequality along with deeper ethnic and cultural diversities could destabilize the country’s democracy and economic reform progress.

Besides contrasting features of populism, both India and Venezuela share a colonial past with around two centuries’ experiences which influences political institutions, language and popular culture in each of the region. The politics in the two countries is shaped by diversity of ethnicities, classes and interest groups. State led Import Substituting Industrialisation (ISI) dominates their economic policies in the last century until 1980s. These striking similarities in the two countries mismatch with the rise of different types of populism and their different outcomes. Guided by this understanding the paper attempts to identify the differences in institutional landscape of India and Venezuela that explains the variances in their populist mobilization.

4.0 Party system influencing populism:

4.1. In Venezuela

In Venezuela, urbanization and industrialization coincided with the demise of oligarchic rule and the commencement of mass politics after 1920s and 1930s. Rapidly increasing industrial working class who became disconnected from 'rural-based patron-client networks of traditional oligarchic parties' fed the rise of new populist parties with state-led ISI policies. On the basis of such political cleavages, two new parties emerged in the decade of 40s: Accion Democratica (AD) in 1941 and Christian Democratic 'Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente' (COPEI) in 1946. After the end of centuries' long colonial period in the late 18th century, Venezuela, in its post-1958 democratic regime, first experienced such highly institutionalized socially entrenched party system who "were electorally stable, internally disciplined, and deeply embedded in civil society" (Roberts 2006).

Following K M Roberts the strength of these parties lies on two crucial features. *Firstly*, differing from party structures in other LA countries, both AD and COPEI operated with hierarchical and bureaucratic control mechanism which embedded "every nook and cranny of Venezuelan society". They successfully confirmed massive political loyalties and, in turn, provided integral collective identities. *Secondly*, the party-society linkages, like many other LA countries, are built on clientelism and corporatism. On clientelistic relations, "[v]ertical patronage networks managed by political brokers link individual clients to a party machine by means of discretionary and selective distribution of political favors, public employment and services, and government contracts or subsidies" (Roberts 2003, 44). On the other hand, corporatist bonds represent a horizontal link between parties and different outsider-groups, for instance, confederation of labor organizations. In exchange of material benefits under state-led ISI, the linkage additionally concretes horizontal support which otherwise would not possible to be extracted by patron-client relations.

Mostly incentivized by the earlier political cleavages and "state-centric matrix", such highly institutionalized pattern inarguably made the parties "to last" and turned Venezuela into a "least likely case" for endemic populist resurgence in most part of LA. But with the stunning victory of Chavez, who was indeed a political outsider and former leader of military

coup, the consecutive demise of the traditional party system grounded the loopholes in its design.

Institutional explanation points to the over-institutionalized and formalized party system what blocks off "most of the informal channels through which citizens voice their demands" (Coppedge 1994, 158). In the same vein, Crisp (2000) advances the logic that arrangement in political institutions though confirms political stability by keeping institutions rigid, it impedes adaptability with changing socio-economic context.

Even structural approach of Karl (1997) on the crisis of party system reinforces the institutional fault-line in Venezuelan case. For him, in 80s and 90s, the declining share of oil bonanza, what traditionally feeds state-interventionist incentive structures and patronage-driven party system, threatens stability in the political institutions. This claim shows the intimidating features of how corporatist and clientelistic state-society linkage, overwhelmingly standing on the provision of material incentive, became vulnerable while failed to provide. Coppedge (1994) rightfully asserts that "there is no other pluralistic system in which parties control so many aspects of the democratic process so completely" and that makes the country "probably the most extreme case of a pathological kind of political control" (Coppedge 1994, 2).

Arrival of Hugo Chavez in political scene convinces the electorate to reach at a rational decision on whom they should support. Political currency of the two traditional parties went down and earmarked by a range of endogenous factors discussed above. The electoral found traditional *partidocracia* no more attractive rather than the promise coming with the direct and personalistic appeal of Hugo Chavez against it. The jointly concerted rationality of electorate and the populist leader confirms the decay of earlier political institutions in Venezuela from 1990s and onwards. Concomitantly, as independent variable it explains an inevitable popular upsurge of economic populism led by Chavez.

4.2. In India

In the same line, the decade of 90s in India embraces peaked populist mobilization from its central to state level. In India, populist rhetoric was integral part of party politics from traditional Congress to newly created Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Congress party who ruled the country for many post-colonial decades is traditionally dominated by the Nehruvian liberals and secular minded politicians. These drivers are considered as the part of elitist segment of the society. Congress frequently responds to losing control over electoral in different states by taking populist initiatives in party politics and state policies. With a pledge to eradicate poverty, Indira Gandhi reoriented the party in the late 1960s to confirm her authoritarian domination. In doing so, she replaced many existing leaders claiming that they worked for elite dominance in the party. To extend and strengthen the party's support among marginalized people, her populist policies include piecemeal anti-poverty programs and nationalization of some major banks for microcredit operation among others. The success of such populist venture of Indira Gandhi in mobilizing a mass support induces the successive party leaders of Congress and other parties to follow the same strategy, though it makes delayed to follow economic austerity and liberalization programs until the 1990s.

Domination of the Congress party has ceaselessly been challenged since the mid-1960s by different populist mobilization backed by people ranging from middle class to marginalized lower with numerous ethnic, language and caste identities. In the domain of incentive structures of democratic politics, a plethora of parties and coalitions has been formed in different states. With populist appeals, these party organizations, such as the Dravidian parties, the socialist parties, the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the BSP, and the Teugu Desam(TD), attempts to confirm their share of vote banks. These local parties with coalition ruled the national government in different time spans: from 1977 to 1980, from 1989 to 1991 and between 1996 and 1998. The manifested possibility to share the power in coalition or to rule in numerous lower tiers of government incentivizes the party leaders at least to loosely institutionalize the party structure.

Contemporary populism in India since 1990s faced eruption of religious rhetoric in politics led by Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jnata Party (BJP). BJP secured its majority in the Lok Sabha, in the lower parliament, in 1998 and formed national government in New Delhi. This party is the political front of the militant Hindu organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which led a contentious move since the mid-80s to build a Hindu temple in Ayodha city of Uttar Pradesh state by demolishing a famous mosque. The BJP by appealing a religious

fundamentalist view of Hindutva, an ideology of "one nation, one people, one culture" based on Hinduism, gained popularity among the Hindu majority.

But by electoral process it was trapped into "the compulsions of coalition politics" (Ruparelia 2006, 317) and while in power shelved the contentious religious issues. The diversification of interest among atomized population in terms of class, race, religion and language in different states of the country keeps competition among parties intensified. For example, the politicians, who opposes both Hindu majoritarian politics and secularly driven Congressian politics, usually rests on the support from the same-minded "Backward Castes" who represent around 50 percent of total Hindu population (Ayyangar 2007, 96). These "Backward Castes" are again subdivided by religion and ethnicities. Even the federal party system created indigenous public spheres that countered gaining majority for any party. Especially, after 1989 the inability of a single party to confirm parliamentary majority became prominent and forced the parties to form coalitions with each other who otherwise hold conflicting interests and policy aims. Consequentially, it quarantined the domination of single party politics and policies. (Ruparelia 2006, 317-8).

Though the pace of neoliberal reform in India is slow, interestingly, it is the coalitional features what enforces the BJP led government to accelerate the reform even with its exclusive reliance on "Backward Castes" for support. The economic restructuring program under every government in 90s is undertaken due to a linkage of the prominent parties with the huge beneficiary group of liberalized economy. Instead of any "shock therapy" model, the reform is slowly advanced with diversified and numerous anti-poverty programs, such as food rationing to the poor, run by central and state governments. As the slow pace in neoliberal reform coincided with shock absorbing pro-poor programs, parties even tagged with socialist did not find an extreme version of economic populism lucrative for them. Moreover, more than a half century long parliamentary system along with federal system is capable to absorb any possibility of authoritarian rule and puts obstacle for any political outsider.

5.0 Comparative discussion

Contrasting to the rigidity of party structure in Venezuela, Indian Congress attempted frequently to rejuvenate its organization by bandwagoning populist agenda since the decade of 60s. Facing the eminent threats from the rise of numerous provincial and national parties, unlike AD and COPEI in Venezuela, Congress in India links itself with informal channels of people's voice. As we see, with a variety of populist welfare policies, parties in India from traditional Congress to BSP rest on a mix of institutionalized and personalized interaction spaces with people.

The flexibility in Indian party politics comes from a highly competitive and multi-party based political space given the plurality of electoral characteristics and demands in different provinces. For example, the data on recent elections in India reveals that "the effective number of national parties" is near 7, whereas "the average effective number of parties" at the constituencies is only around 2.5. This approaches that "different parties are getting significant shares of votes across constituencies and that many parties get votes only in particular locales" (Chhibber and Kollman 2004, 9). Indian federal system under parliamentary regime directly incentivizes electorally successful parties by positioning them in numerous legislative and executive posts from provinces to centre.

On the contrary, centralized system in Venezuela under presidential regime was confined to two-party system and their all-encompassing operations with strong clientele base do not incentivize making any new party under the dominating institutional apparatus. Hence, incentive-driven Indian multi-party system, by the way it continuously revitalizes itself responding to societal change, keeps itself capable to challenge and restrain any possible rise of anti-status quo forces. But in Venezuela, on one hand, the two parties failed to respond to changing social context and, on the other hand, the status quo of the existing party system blocks any flow of incentive if any new party is made to bandwagon new need.

But the party system in India in most cases cannot supersede the democratic polity which is largely demarcated by a dense of well functioning institutions including the independent judiciary and "steel-framed" bureaucracy among others. The strength what these institutions hold to confine any populist mobilization is not only inherited from British colonial rule but also built on the thousand-years institutional "path dependency" since *Mughal* regime. Instead, in Venezuela the

institutionalized party regime captured all the state institutions and shaped them discretionarily. For example, appointment in judiciary and administration, the two important organs of the state, is distributed among “local brokers” as reward for their work of mobilizing horizontal and vertical clienteles for AD or COPEI (Coppedge 1993, 262). Non-institutionalized features of state mechanism provides a fertile and unrestrained political landscape for any populist uprising in Venezuela, while the situation is opposite in India for strong presence of state institutions.

On economic policies, Indian parties are concomitantly inclined to both state-centric and neoliberal matrix. Given the huge population with fragmented interests and needs, Indian parties coming into power avoid any drastic shift toward specific set of policies. The increasing trend of coalitional politics for power since 1977 places also obstacle for an absolute consensus on neoliberal policy shift or “state-centric matrix”. Unlike “oil bonanza” based horizontal and vertical clientelistic relations in Venezuela, party-society linkage in India does not depend on such overwhelming flow of material benefit to the clienteles. From ideology to caste-consciousness shapes the rationality of the linkage as well (Ayyangar 2007). For Congress, a segment of support-base comes from middle class who wants to uphold secularism against religious fundamentalism which instead convinces other to support BJP. The support of some backward caste-based parties like BSP or TD comes for their sensitivity to those people who, for example, are grateful to these parties for confirming their quotas in governmental jobs and higher education institutes. (Ruparelia 2006)

Instead, in Venezuela, Party-society linkage with its basis on direct material benefit makes it vulnerable to shock on the flow of such bonanza. Following to the oil shocks and initiatives of austerity policies in 80s and 90s, withdrawing support by people from AD and COPEI indicates their skyrocketing expectation from the promising leader who cannot stand on such massive demands anymore.

6. Conclusion

The sharp difference between Indian and Venezuelan party system is clear. If new needs and demands of people in the changing social context remain uncultivated, this drives a populist leader. The first and foremost rational action expected from him is to go against dominating

institutional apparatus. Inevitably the existing party-captured weak state-mechanism along with the “highly” institutionalized and rigid party system are not capable to challenge or restrain such populist mobilization. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela followed these loopholes by articulating people’s need in 1990s and appealing against *partidocracia*. His political aspiration and people’s need converge into economic populism explained as massive statist policies ignoring the effect of such. In Indian case, the possibility of such unilineal convergence is always contested by the party system and the associated incentive pattern. In both the cases, populism does not rest on a causal link with specific economic model; rather it links with the rational strategy of electoral victory and the weakness of existing institutions to incentivize both the people and the leadership.

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