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Media anti-populism and political parallelism in Latin America

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Abstract

This article examines seven Latin American cases in which anti-populist media played central roles in organizing political opposition to a populist regime, creating a political cleavage between populism and anti-populism which continued to structure both journalism and political competition following the end of populist rule. It contributes to the literature on media and populism by focusing on an actor usually neglected in this literature—the anti-populist media—and by shifting the focus from press freedom to political parallelism. Following the case studies we take up conceptual issues related to the logics of populism and anti-populism and to debates about the applicability of the concept of political parallelism and of mediatization to Latin America and other regions of the global South.

Keywords: populism, anti-populism, political parallelism, mediatization, Latin America

The relationship between populism and journalism in Latin America has usually been framed as the story of a dramatic clash between "the press" and populist governments. In this narrative, populist leaders such as Cristina Fernández in Argentina, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia or Rafael Correa in Ecuador are seen as actors with important authoritarian tendencies, who in their effort to consolidate power come into conflict with the independent press, silencing critical media and attacking press freedom (Conaghan, 2016; De la Torre & Ortiz Lemos, 2016; Kellam & Stein, 2016; Kenny, 2020), as well as triggering polarization and Manicheism in the public sphere (Handlin, 2018; Roberts, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). This interpretation is connected with a broader analysis present in much of the literature on populism globally that stresses the "illiberal" tendencies of populism (e.g. Müller, 2016). It clearly offers important insights into the relation of populist governments in Latin America and the media, as populist governments often indeed consider themselves to represent the will of the people against its enemies, and tend to be hostile to institutions of "horizontal accountability" in general—media, the judiciary, parliamentary opposition—seeing them as undemocratic limits on popular sovereignty, consistent with O'Donnell's (1994) concept of "delegative democracy." Populist leaders also tend to come to power in situations where political party systems have collapsed, and to be political outsiders without the support of organized political apparatuses, and are therefore highly dependent on media to reach their constituencies and potentially vulnerable to hostile media coverage.

This perspective has provided important insights into the relation between media and populist governments in Latin America, but it also has many limitations and blind spots. This kind of approach, in which populism is seen narrowly as a sort of proto-authoritarian politics, protagonized by rogue political actors, neglects populism's connection with economic and political crises—the current wave of populism in Latin America took place in the context of a reaction against the neoliberal policies of the "Washington Consensus," which became dominant just as most of Latin America was returning to democracy in the 1980s—and the sources of popular support which bring populists to power. As a number of scholars have pointed out (Artz, 2017; Kitzberger, 2017; Palos-Pons & Hallin, 2021), moreover, this standard interpretation of the relation of populist governments to the media assumes an idealized liberal model of the media as an independent, neutral, apolitical institution, ignoring the complicated relationship between the media and the state and political and economic elites documented in research on Latin American media systems (Albuquerque, 2019; Echeverría et al., 2024; Guerrero & Márquez Ramírez, 2014; Hallin & Echeverría, 2025; Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Márquez Ramírez & Guerrero, 2023). This literature stresses that media in Latin America are typically "captured" by political and economic elites, that journalistic professionalism and autonomy are limited, and also that media tend in many cases to intervene actively in political conflicts. Periods of populist rule--particularly left-wing populist rule– in Latin America are typically characterized by "*guerras mediaticas*" in which most media are divided into two camps, supporting and opposing the populist leader, an alignment, which, as we shall see, is sometimes strong enough to become a lasting political cleavage outliving the populist regime. The conventional focus in the literature on media and populism on the actions of the populist leader to combat the established media obscures the dynamic of these conflicts by ignoring the other key actor,

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and in particular the active role media often play as leading mobilizers of political opposition. Kitzberger (2023), focusing on the case of Argentina, makes the argument that during the populist government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner anti-populist media emerged as key actors, restructuring both Argentine journalism and the cleavage structure of Argentinian politics. Kitzberger's analysis points to the importance of theorizing *anti-populism* and the media as crucial to understanding media/politics dynamics in contexts of populist mobilization.

The pattern of media-political parallelism structured around populist/anti-populist cleavages, proposed by Kitzberger and explored more widely across the region in this study, raises important conceptual/theoretical issues in comparative analysis of media and politics. It foregrounds the mostly omitted centrality of anti-populism in the theorization of populism and the media's role in populist politics, and one of our objectives here is to explore more fully the deeper logic of anti-populism, and its relation to the logic of populism described in the large literature on that subject. Secondly, we recast the discussion of the concept of political parallelism outside Western contexts by connecting media anti-populism to the latest literature on cleavages in comparative politics. Third, our empirical analysis also challenges current theories of the mediatization of politics as unilinear processes of media differentiation from politics in that it makes clear how, in certain contemporary contexts, tendencies towards the mediatization of politics interact with a (re-)politicization of the media.

Research on anti-populism

While there is an enormous literature on populism, and a large literature specifically on populism and the media, the literature on anti-populism is quite limited. This is probably related to the normative character attached to the concept of "populism," which across different contexts has most often been treated as an abnormal or pathological form of politics threatening liberal democracy, and is most often associated in the scholarly literature with the nativist, anti-liberal right in Europe. As the default position in academia, anti-populism has been naturalized, making discourses opposing populism invisible (Moffitt, 2018; Miró, 2019). Mainstream populism scholars have at times pointed to the significance of anti-populism as a narrative that antagonistically frames populism as a morally debased threatening political evil, and thus constitutes an important part of the dynamics of polarization which characterize periods of populist mobilization (Moffitt, 2018; Mudde & Rovira, 2018). Detailed research on anti-populism, however, has been rare.

In the Latin American case, some scholars have analyzed counter-mobilization led by propertied and conservative groups as a reaction to incorporative populist parties and plebeian politics (Collier & Collier, 1991; Knight, 1998). Ostiguy (1997), in his often-cited research on Peronism, associated the phenomena of populism and anti-populism with "high" and "low" sociocultural, affective and performative dimensions of political identities connected with preexisting group differences, and analyzed anti-populism as a political discourse that deplores "barbaric" coarseness and personalism, erecting itself as a defense of "civilization" and institutions. Enríquez Arévalo (2019) and Semán (2021) have also examined the long history of anti-populism in Latin America, where populist mobilization has been an important part of political history since the mid-twentieth century.

Political Scientist Van Dyck (2019), focusing on cases in both Southeast Asia and Latin America, argues that anti-populist forces do not generally produce strong political parties. In explaining this, he points in part to their close relation with the media, which, he argues, often serve essentially as a substitute form of mobilization. In the European context, the most extensive research on anti-populism focuses on Greece, a case which has important parallels to those analyzed here, since it involves a left-wing party, SYRIZA, which, like the populist governments of the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America, came to power in the context of an economic crisis in which the hegemony of neoliberal economic policy was brought into question. Galanopoulos and Venizelos (2022), in a study of anti-populist discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece, refer to the central role of the media in reproducing a pervasive public discourse against populism. They frame this rhetoric as creating a "hierarchical logic" of political styles, citing Ostiguy's (2017) discussion of "low" and "high" politico-cultural styles. Stavrakakis et al. (2018, 2019), also analyzing the Greek case, argue that "populist discourses never operate in a vacuum, and need to be situated within the context of political antagonism, within the broader hegemonic struggle … This is impossible without focusing on the emerging populism-anti-populism frontier" (2017, p. 5). They also focus on the media, and the tendency of the media to become divided between antagonistic populist and anti-populist camps. A number of scholars have also focused on the role of media in Western Europe and North America in articulating discourses critical of populism (Carlson, Robinson & Lewis, 2021; de Jonge, 2019; Goyvaerts & de Cleen, 2020; Novais, 2022; Wettstein et al., 2018).

The scope and argument of this study

In this monograph, we explore the political role of anti-populist media and the formation of a populist/anti-populist political cleavage in seven Latin American countries in which left-wing governments came to power in the first decades of the twenty-first century. In doing this, we seek to offer a new perspective in the analysis of the "confrontational media regimes" (Guerrero et al., 2024) that emerge in periods of left-wing populist rule in two ways. First, we focus on the missing actor in the existing literature on media and populism—the anti-populists, and specifically anti-populist media. Second, we shift away from framing media politics relationships exclusively in terms of press freedom, and instead foreground patterns of political parallelism, as the concept has been developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and others. We consider the political alignment of media during and following periods of populist rule; the nature of anti-populist political discourses and their manifestation in the media; transformations in the profession of journalism, as manifested factors such as newsroom composition; reporting practices and professional identity and organization; and, finally, transformation in party alignments and the cleavage structure of politics, and the ways in which media may be involved in those political transformations.

In Part I we look in detail at two cases which, we argue, are closely parallel in important ways (and parallel, as well, to cases analyzed by others such as Stavrakakis), and suggest a distinct model of populist/anti-populist political/media

parallelism. These are the Argentinian case originally identified by Kitzberger (2023), and the case of Ecuador during and following the Presidency of Rafael Correa (Palos Pons, 2024). In terms of context, these cases both involve populist leaders who came to power following political crises that discredited much of the political elite and disrupted the existing party system. Each is characterized by sharp antagonisms between the populist governments and the majority of the traditional, commercial media; populist leaders attempted to promote a pro-populist media sector, while the majority of traditional media moved into political opposition centered around an anti-populist discourse, setting up a sharp political division in the media. In both cases, we argue, anti-populist media played a central role in mobilizing opposition to the populist government. And in both, the strong political role of anti-populist media continued following transitions to conservative, non-populist governments. Populist media, no longer enjoying state support, became marginal following those transitions, but the populist/anti-populist cleavage continued to structure both political competition and journalism.

When we refer to "anti-populist media," we mean media that take an active stance against populist leaders and movements, and articulate a political narrative centered around populism as the root of political ills. We will develop the argument that media anti-populism is parallel in many ways to the binary logic of populism itself as a kind of mirror image, interpreting the world around the opposition of the good people to its enemy—for anti-populists, the populist leader. It has often been observed that media in Latin America tend to be both conservative politically and elite-oriented. These kinds of conservative, elite-oriented media do certainly often become anti-populist media in the contexts we discuss here, but the phenomenon of media anti-populism is specific and needs to be distinguished from media conservatism or elitism generally. Conservative newspapers are not necessarily anti-populist—in many contexts the populism anti-populism divide is not salient. Anti-populist media, as we shall see, are also not necessarily conservative; in many cases, left-leaning media also become part of the anti-populist camp, as for example with *Proceso* in Mexico and La Silla Vacía in Colombia. Anti-populist media are also not necessarily elite-oriented. As we shall see, in contrast to the argument of Ostiguy, important anti-populist media arise in the cases we study here that adopt a strong plebian style of address to the audience, including La Nacion+ in Argentina, politicized tabloid newspapers in Ecuador, and the widely-read online outlet *Semana* in Colombia. Theorists of populism have stressed that populism is a not a binary concept: a particular movement or leader can adopt some elements of populist strategy or discourse and not others. The same can be said of media anti-populism. There is a strong tendency, to be sure, in the contexts we write about here, for media to feel pressure to identify clearly with one political camp or another. But when we speak of "anti-populist media," we do not mean to imply that media anti-populism is an all or nothing phenomenon; instead, some media may adopt anti-populism partially or temporarily.

In Part II, we consider a number of other cases of left-wing populist rule in Latin America, and assess the extent to which this pattern applies to those other cases. Our study focuses on the wave of populism associated with the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America, which arose largely as a reaction against the effects of the neoliberal policies introduced in the region in the 1990s. As we shall see, elements of the pattern we identify in the Argentinian and Ecuadorean cases can be found in other cases as well, but there are also important differences among the cases covered here, and we will explore possible explanations for those differences These additional cases include Venezuela during the presidency of Hugo Chávez, Bolivia under Evo Morales and the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) party following his removal from office, Mexico under Manuel Lopez Obrador, Colombia under Gustavo Petro, and Brazil during and after the rule of "Lula" da Silva and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores or Workers Party). We make references in our discussion to earlier historical cases of populism and anti-populism in the region, and we consider the long legacy of the populist/anti-populist divide an important reason for its strength as an organizing axis for political cleavage and media-politics parallelism. But we do not make the assumption that the specific forms and roles of media anti-populism would necessarily be found in earlier historical periods.

The scope of our study is also confined to left-wing populism. In Latin America, in contrast to many other areas of the world where populism has been studied, populist movements have most commonly emerged on the left, rather than the right. Traditional media do often come into conflict with right-wing populist regimes in the region, and right-wing, like left-wing populist leaders, often target media as part of the corrupt elite they seek to overturn. However, we think that there are important differences in the dynamics between right-wing populists and the media, with right-wing populist leaders, for example, more often able to capture or build alliances with important parts of the established media, as in the cases of leaders like Berlusconi, himself a media mogul, Trump with his alliance with Fox News, or Bolsonaro, who had a close alliance with the television network Record. We therefore do not attempt to analyze these cases here, although we do discuss the role that anti-populist media may have played in creating the conditions for the subsequent rise of right-wing populist leaders in two of the cases we consider here, Argentina and Brazil.

In Part II we also consider the international dimension of media anti-populism, looking at the circulation of anti-populist discourses and political alignments across borders.

Following accounts of the seven cases in the first two parts, we turn in the Part III to a deeper consideration of conceptual foundations for understanding the pattern described here, and some of the implications of these case studies for important theoretical debates in comparative analysis. First, we consider the *logics of populist and anti-populist political and media discourses*, and the extent to which they are distinct but essentially parallel, working as mirror images of one another. We also in this section consider differences between the kind of media anti-populism described here, and the role of media in covering populist movements and leaders in consolidated democracies. Second, we discuss the implications of these findings for debates about *political parallelism in Latin American media systems*. Here we also bring in the literature on political cleavages in comparative politics, which is often neglected in discussions of political parallelism in media studies. Finally, we consider the implications of the pattern described here for the study of *the mediatization of politics* and the distinct forms it may take in Latin America.

Methodology

The cases selected for this analysis include all countries in which left-wing populist leaders came to power in Latin

America in the first decades of the 21st century. It has often been observed that populism is a fuzzy and contested concept, and many recent discussions emphasize that particular movements or leaders will often adopt some elements of the populist discourse, strategy or style, but not others. The cases considered here all involve leaders generally seen as strong examples of populism, reflecting the core definition of populism as involving an articulation of the political world in terms of an opposition between "the people" and an elite characterized as oppressing them, as well as other elements commonly associated with populism—including hostility to "checks and balances" on majority rule, outsider status, personalized rule, and "low-brow" cultural style, though there are differences among them. The one exception is the Brazilian case. "Lula" da Silva may have adopted elements of populist rhetoric at certain points in his presidency, but is normally considered a part of the "party-institutional Left," as Levitsky and Roberts (2011) put it, rather than the "populist-outsider Left." He was closely connected with an established political party, carried out politics largely through negotiation with elites rather than confrontation and appeal to public opinion, and did not challenge most institutional structures, including those of the media system. We include the Brazilian case primarily because many scholars (Azevedo, 2018; Gagliardi, Tavares & Albuquerque, 2022; Nava & Marques, 2019) have argued that the media employed anti-populist discourse against "Lula" and the PT, and Brazil might in that sense be considered a case of anti-populism even if it is not a case of populism. Brazil is a marginal case, and scholars we consulted there disagreed more than those in any other country about whether the patterns we found in Argentina and Ecuador did have parallels in the Brazilian case. We do not include cases where non-populist left-wing governments were in power (Chile or Uruguay), and the scope of our study does not include authoritarian systems (Cuba, Nicaragua, or Venezuela under Maduro).

The discussion of the Argentinian and Ecuadorean cases is based on extensive multi-method original research. This research was not designed originally as a comparative study; instead, these two studies were carried out separately by two of the authors of this monograph, and, after becoming aware of close similarities, we decided to develop a comparison. For this reason, the methods involved are not strictly parallel, though we have tried to fill gaps in the data well enough to carry out the method of structured, focused comparison, looking, for example at shifts in newsroom composition in both countries, or at "source endogamy," that is the use by journalists of sources only from the political faction with which they are aligned. In some cases, comparable data were not available for both cases. We were able to find survey data, for example, on partisanship and news media use for Argentina but not for Ecuador. Shifts in news media alignments and journalistic practices in Argentina were traced through analysis of meta-journalistic pieces, ethnographic work, and nine author-conducted in-depth interviews with journalists from Buenos Aires' main newsrooms, which were used to assess media re-alignments, owners' preferences and strategic choices, and internal changes, practices and affects in newsrooms. To inquire into the growth and changing meanings of anti-populist discourse in media narratives, all online articles between 1996 and 2019 from *La Nación*, one of Buenos Aires' two leading newspapers, containing the search terms populismo/ista were retrieved. A representative sample was subsequently content analyzed, coding speakers, frames associated with populism and actors referred to as populist. Media transformations in Ecuador were examined based on 45 in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of Ecuadorean journalists, policymakers, political advisors and analysts, along with ethnographic work both in Quito and Guayaquil (including visits to newsrooms). Interview-based research for both the Argentine and Ecuadorean cases was carried out following the applicable ethics rules at the principal investigators' institutions, and all interview subjects were offered the opportunity to speak anonymously.[1] Some, as public figures, were comfortable being quoted by name. A longitudinal content analysis of *El Universo* and *El Comercio*, the most important newspapers, was carried out, including samples of content from before, during and after Correa's presidency. The other cases are discussed based on secondary literature, some ethnographic fieldwork on Bolivia, Mexico and Brazil, anonymous conversations with local journalists in Colombia, and on responses from prominent experts within each country who kindly responded to our queries and which we used as much as possible to provide comparable data across cases, though unevenness in the existing research inevitably means that we do not always have fully parallel information on all the cases.

Part I: The Argentine and Ecuadorean cases

Argentina

Argentina's democracy resurfaced in the context of the crisis of state-led development and of a debt crisis that progressively narrowed policy choice to economic liberalization within the so-called "Washington Consensus." The onset of neoliberalism came as Carlos Menem, elected president in 1989 wielding traditional Peronist redistributive promises, switched to market-reformism.

That context transformed media-politics relations. Hardship diluted party brands and trust in politics within an increasingly mediatized political communication. Market deregulation resulted in media-market concentration and conglomeration processes, further increasing media elite leverage vis-à-vis political elites. With the removal of cross-media ownership bans and broadcasting privatization, *Clarín*, Argentina's premier commercial daily up to deregulation, morphed into the dominant multi-media Grupo Clarín. Its audience-leading outlets enhanced the group's agenda-setting muscle and its power reputation.

As Waisbord (2000) observed, "[t]he shelving of welfare-state populism and the disappearance of revolutionary politics and military intervention … spawned a new political scenario" (p. 179) that fostered convergences in journalism and news media de-alignments. Editorial differences persisted between catchall tabloid-style *Clarín*, conservative *La Nación* and progressive-opinionated *Página/12*, the capital's other leading dailies. However, professional values in newsrooms tended to converge towards an increased fact-orientation in a context of disenchantments with partisan politics among journalists and publics demanding "independent" news. Editors, in turn, expanded their newsrooms' internal pluralism by recruiting journalists from diverse political backgrounds. Inspired by the professional ideal of the US

[1] Research on Ecuador required formal approval of the Institutional Review Boards at the University of California, San Diego (Project # 170922S) and San Jose State University (Protocol # 23-231).

watchdog role, journalists competed to expose wrongdoing. Government-driven attempts to prevent critical reporting provided cohesion and dissolved disagreements. Prestigious professionals left political differences behind to create PERIODISTAS, an organization aimed at denouncing attacks on the press (Sivak, 2015; Stefoni, 2019). The 1990s would later be remembered as a golden age in journalism (Minutella & Álvarez, 2019; Tenembaum, 2010).

As in the rest of Latin America, the 1998–2002 economic downturn signaled the exhaustion of the Washington Consensus and changed this political context. In Argentina, recession led to social unrest. By 2001, massive street mobilizations laid bare a crisis of political representation epitomized in the slogan "*que se vayan todos* (out with them all)," and eventually led to the fall of Menem's non-Peronist successor. Néstor Kirchner won the 2003 elections by steering the surviving Peronist machine to the left through anti-neoliberal appeals. However, despite populist traits in discourse, his policies remained comparatively moderate, and liberal-democratic institutions were not challenged by constitutional overhauls (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Concerned about governability, Kirchner adopted a transactional strategy with the mainstream media. Especially with the Clarín Group he cultivated accommodation, investing in a personal relationship with the group's CEO and delivering friendly regulatory decisions, scoops and access to government sources. Clarín's financial weakness in the aftermath of the crisis, and initial sympathy with economic policies provided incentives for offering benevolent coverage in exchange (Kitzberger, 2016a). Later on, tensions with news organizations started to grow.

It was shortly after the election in 2007 of Cristina Fernández, Kirchner's wife, that a more radical populist mobilization, antagonizing socio-economic elites, was set in motion. A polarizing confrontation was triggered by a governmental attempt to increase taxes on agricultural exports. Landowners and agricultural producers reacted with massive roadblocks, denounced as "the pickets of abundance" against "the people" by the president, and their protest movement expanded to urban upper and middle classes, later leading to the defeat in congress of the government's bill.

The conflict over the tax hike was the critical juncture that would reorganize political conflict and competition in Argentina for at least the following fifteen years. The ideological and affective polarization cemented both a Kirchnerist and an anti-Kirchnerist identity, which would alternate in government through two competitive coalitions in 2015, with Mauricio Macri's electoral triumph, and again in 2019, with Alberto Fernández's victory and moderate populist coalition comeback. That story is simultaneously the story of a major shift in the media system from relative de-alignment to a form of political parallelism in which media both expressed and played a central role in the rise of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

During the 2008 roadblocks, the government perceived the big news media, led by Clarín, as favoring landowners in coverage and thereby driving the urban middle classes to support protestors. In that context, the Kirchners switched to an open confrontation strategy with the conglomerate, unleashing a "media war" that lasted throughout Cristina's two presidencies.

The onset of this confrontation between political and media elites may be explained, on both sides, in terms of instrumental decisions in a particular conjuncture. However, these initial strategies would transform political identities, professional roles and journalistic practices in ways that instrumental logic cannot account for. That new formation would become stable and independent from its triggering causes.

The deliberate decision to confront Clarín and the mainstream media by characterizing them as anti-popular de-facto powers would gradually result in the crystallization of a Kirchnerist identity as a force constitutively antagonistic to the "hegemonic" or "corporate media." The choices made in the same conjuncture by the media elites, particularly Clarín's executives, also initially based on strategic calculus, equally unleashed a process that transformed professional identities within media and journalistic institutions. The decision to stick to confrontation instead of seeking appeasement[2] implied the assumption of an us-vs-them logic that found consistency in articulating a view of Kirchnerism as an existential threat. The Manichean, antagonistic logic of anti-populist rhetoric mirrored populist rhetoric, and resounded among anti-Peronists, right wing sectors and even liberal progressives, within and outside the media, who experienced the government-led popular mobilization as a threat.

The discourse of defense of the independent press against authoritarian populism—commonly equated with that of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, would provide media elites (owners, executives, editors-in-chief, and media celebrities) a narrative to oppose the government, and provide meaning to "traumatic" threat perceptions of media professionals. It would help craft internal cohesion in news organizations, streamlining newsrooms around their politicized agenda, erode rivalries and enhance solidarity and coordination between media organizations, especially between *Clarín* and *La Nación* (Kitzberger, 2023). The mounting anti-populist rhetoric of media elites and journalists cannot be reduced to strategic self-presentation; it also reflects expanding self-understandings and meaning construction within media institutions. In *Así lo viví*, his memoirs of the media war, Clarín's CEO maintains that the survival of the conglomerate constituted the last barrier against the triumph of an "authoritarian" and "economically anachronistic populism" (Magnetto, 2016). Such statements are not mere cynical discursive justifications, they also fix meaning and identity in power struggles.

Embattled against the dominant media, the government deployed a number of policies aimed at altering power relations in the media sphere. Denouncing the media monopolies as de facto powers resonated with long-standing media democratization demands and was one of the progressive issues absorbed by the government's media reformism. The approval, in 2009, of an Audiovisual Communication Services Law was at the heart of this media politics. Although it was decried as a device to muzzle the independent media, Clarín in particular, the law, drafted by the media democratization movement, differed from those in other populist regimes by focusing on market concentration and not on content regulation. In this sense, the law itself did not necessarily violate international freedom of expression standards. What was more controversial was the selective implementation of the law's provisions. While enforcement was not applied to media friendly to the government, Clarín was pressured to comply

[2] The option existed, given Néstor Kirchner's willingness to negotiate between 2008 and 2009, as documented by Sivak (2013).

with a norm that would have forced the conglomerate to disinvest and sell several strategic assets. Clarín successfully resisted the law's enforcement by filing judicial complaints until the end of Cristina Kirchner's mandate.

In the effort to contest the suddenly oppositional media's agenda and to expose what it characterized in populist terms as the false independence of the hegemonic media, the government, in addition to its direct communication strategies, revamped state and allied outlets. This "mother of all battles" was fought, on a daily basis, on screens and newsprint. The Kirchners did not resort to regular direct presidential broadcasts in the style of Chávez's *Aló Presidente* or Correa's *Enlaces*. Presidential direct "unmediated" speech was secured through the use of the lectern on institutional broadcasted (pseudo)events, frequent mandatory broadcasts (*cadenas*) and later through social media. An important instance, both in agenda setting and in identity building, was *678*, a successful daily prime-time news show aired on public television. The show consisted essentially in a reviewing of mainstream news outlets' political coverage, practicing "the critique of real power" as the program's slogan said. Through a savvy use of television archives, the show exposed contradiction, biases and double standards, attributing these to the corporate and political interests of media elites. The show cultivated a mobilized public. By 2010, the *678* Facebook group reached 600,000 followers, which was critical in the street mobilization of young, urban, middle-class progressives that took on the streets especially during the congressional debates around the media law (Kitzberger, 2010; Schejtman, 2021a).

Formation and growth of political parallelism

From the onset of the media war, the media system shifted towards a distinct political parallelism structured around the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Most of the private mainstream news media adopted an anti-populist stance that manifested in content and in changes in professional values and practices. Moreover, the adoption of an anti-populist rhetoric led to a form of media-driven partisan mobilization that stabilized and persisted even with the populist party out of national government in a polarized yet persistently competitive political system.

Political parallelism was manifested in media content, in newsroom composition, in professional values and practices, in debates and fissures within the journalistic field and in the partisanship of media audiences. These changes began during the Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner period, and persisted as the anti-populist government of Mauricio Macri came to power following the 2015 election, and finally into the more moderate Peronist government of Alberto Fernández. Though weakened after the 2015 electoral defeat, Kirchnerism remained competitive, re-casting the media-owners' cause in terms of impeding populism's return to power. In a 2016 interview with a niche site, Carlos Pagni, *La Nación's* foremost political columnist, described the traditional news media as carrying their own endogenous agenda against Kirchnerism, perceived to be a very important threat to the press itself, even after having left office. This fact, he added, bestowed the incoming conservative government which replaced the populist Kirchner government with an unprecedented advantage in the public sphere, as anti-populist media regarded it as a necessary bulwark against populism.[3] The reversal of Kirchnerist media policies reinforced the commitment. Upon assuming office, Macri dismantled the 2009 audiovisual law's ownership restrictions that had threatened Clarín's integrity and further paved the way for the conglomerate's merger with one of the telecom duopoly operators.

From the onset of the conflict between mainstream media and the Kirchner government in 2008, external pluralism, one of the most typical indicators of political parallelism, spilled beyond editorial pages and began to manifest in the form of negative-partisan coverage in news media content. News outlets increasingly committed to one-sided reporting, in a way that denied voice, standing and legitimacy to the out-group. News shows presented increasingly morally charged accounts of political reality. Previous watchdog orientations morphed into a sort of "selective watchdog" journalism, with (corruption) denunciations focused on the opponent (Reuters Institute, 2019; Schuliaquer, 2018; Schuliaquer and Moreira Cesar, 2024). On one side, most mainstream media, especially Clarín's outlets, *La Nación*, and the increasingly important digital-native news-website *Infobae* became systematically oppositional, framing the government as a corrupted Chávez-like authoritarian populism. On the pro-government side stood *Página/12*, the state media and an increasing number of private outlets created or coopted to satisfy the needs of the counterhegemonic battle. These, following the government's cues, represented the opposition as oligarchic, antidemocratic and destabilizing forces. Following the defeat of the populist government in 2015 this partisan alignment persisted, but became highly asymmetrical. Pro-populist media voices shrunk as Kirchnerism lost control over the state. With little sympathy from business interests and advertisers, formerly populist-aligned media either disappeared or re-invented themselves to survive. Ousted from free-to-air television, populist-friendly media narrowed to a cable news channel, alternative websites and social media, small radio stations, and crisis-ridden *Página/12*.

Politicized narratives pervaded the media now realigned along partisan differences, in both opinion and reporting. Following the cues of the populist political elite, the pro-populist aligned media engaged in a counter-hegemonic battle by mass-mediating and popularizing media critical discourses in which the "independence" claims of mainstream media journalists was treated as illusory, at best, given their subservience to unelected socio-economic media-linked elites. On the side of the mainstream media opposing Kirchnerism, an anti-populist media narrative which, branded "populism" as a political evil incompatible with liberal democracy, progressively permeated opinion and also manifested in news content. Mirroring the establishment-blaming narratives in pro-populist media, the novel explicit critique of populism expanded in the mainstream media well before 2008, as it was prompted by the regional leftist-populist tide, in particular by Hugo Chávez's rise in Venezuela. Content analysis reported by Kitzberger (2023) assesses frequency, uses and meanings of the signifier "populism" in *La Nación's* website between 1996 and 2019. It shows a quantitative surge from 2000 on, triggered mostly (until 2015–2016) by events in Latin America's left turn countries. The steeper climb rate in usage from 2012–2013 on, corresponds to the stage of more self-conscious and systematic effort by the mainstream media to erode Kirchnerism. Regarding the meanings attached to populism, the economic framing of populism, which associates the term with redistributive policies and deficit spending typical of Latin America's mid-twentieth century state-led

[3] https://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Carlos-Pagni-Alberto-tiene-una-vision-mas-liberal-delpoder-porque-es-un-peronista-de-la-Capital

economies, dominated initially. After 2000, political frames of populism, characterizing it as a threat to liberal-democracy and its institutions like a free press, emerged potently, even surpassing the traditional economic frame in the midst of the media war. As for the sources of these political framings of populism, the study shows that over a third are media-originated utterances, while public intellectuals, politicians, scholar and civil society groups made up most of the quoted voices of political anti-populism.

In contrast to the highbrow anti-populist narrative found in elite newspapers, in popular news shows, tabloid style journalism or journalistic best sellers, "populism" is more frequently framed in a criminalizing way, associated with corruption, intended to depict *kirchnerismo* as an association aimed at plundering through the control of the state (Saferstein, 2021; Schuliaquer, 2018).

In a country with a strong tradition of journalistic book writing and consumption, the growth of such anti-populist media narratives was also reflected in the book market. An analysis of political books published by the two transnational commercial publishers in Argentina (Random House and Planeta) between 2003 and 2015 reveals that "populism" and the critique of the Kirchners' (authoritarian and/or corrupted) exercise of power, boomed and was among the three main political book topics in Argentina. These big publishing houses form part of the mainstream media circuit: media promotion of their products provide them with access to mass publics, while book authorship grants journalists or media intellectuals prestige and symbolic capital in the media field. While these editorial powerhouses also published visions from the other side of the divide, they were far less successful commercially and therefore less frequent (Saferstein, 2021).

Many of the interviewed journalists observed that the atmospheres and composition of newsrooms also changed with the confrontation. In terms of the political orientations of news media employees, a shift from relative internal pluralism towards external pluralism took place. The politically sensitive beats underwent processes of self-selection. Especially in Grupo Clarín's war-torn newsrooms, political coexistence became uneasy. Discomforted with wartime news-operations, government sympathizers and neutrals across newsroom hierarchies left. Several media-critical journalists and celebrities migrated to pro-government media; others took advantage of early retirement offers. A number migrated internally to nonpolitical sections. Those remaining in "hot" political coverage were mainly averse to Kirchnerism. Meanwhile, sympathy with Kirchnerism expanded in several newsrooms. *Página/12* and newer outlets that thrived during the cultural battle attracted young progressives critical of mainstream media, contributing to revitalize more advocacy-oriented professional identities (Rosenberg, 2018; Schuliaquer, 2018; Sivak, 2015).

The emergence of the populist/anti-populist cleavage reshaped the press's professional values, norms and practices. A mode of so-called *war journalism* took over, especially in Clarín's newsrooms. The corporate management monitored and interfered in newsrooms as it had not done before. Source-journalist relations fell apart. While government officers were ordered to avoid contacting Clarín's journalists, the shutdown on government perspectives became mandatory inside the conglomerate's newsrooms. Reporters suspected of unauthorized side-contacts risked being "frozen" (Sivak, 2015). Following the transition to the anti-populist Cambiemos government, reporting continued to marginalize Kirchnerist sources, while government narratives ran mostly unquestioned (Zunino, 2019).

One-sided reporting and source endogamy are not reducible to external pressures on journalists. Besides these, important changes in professional values and judgements followed with the onset of the media war. As the populist government became increasingly identified as an existential threat to freedom of the press and/or liberal democracy, it became implicit that it could not be engaged following conventional journalistic rules, and these practices continued with populism in opposition. Asked why Kirchnerist politicians were not contacted in covering stories involving them, editors at *Clarín* and *La Nación* alleged the "irresponsibility" of providing voice to sources disseminating "falsehoods" and serving "vested interests" (Becerra, 2019). Populists could not be engaged following conventional journalistic rules. Such vilifying views also offered a rationalization to the normalized practice of publishing illegally leaked fragments of state intelligence wiretappings of populist opposition members (Schejtman & Becerra, 2019). In a 2016 interview, *Clarín's* editor-in-chief during the conflict, who had admitted the newsroom's switch to "war journalism" during the abnormal circumstances, acknowledged an unjustified inertia in the post-populist phase.[4] One-sided coverage found justification in the higher end of defeating populism.

As in Latin America generally, conceptions of the proper role of journalism have always been plural and debated in Argentina. However, during the 1990s, as shown above, there was a convergence around facticity, denouncing wrongdoing, and the centrality of an investigative role, which brought together European-like advocacy traditions with the rising liberal model of watchdog journalism (Waisbord, 2000). With the rise of leftist populism, divisions sharpened once more to the point that some, on both sides, cast doubt on the others as belonging to the profession. Skepticism of "illusory neutrality," associated with advocacy traditions, reflourished in newsrooms with populist sympathies. Meanwhile, in an apparent paradox, independence from partisan politics and the Fourth Estate model are the main role orientations invoked in anti-populist aligned media. Dissonances between such normative claims and actual journalistic practice are neutralized by the naturalized assumption of populism's aberrant—existentially threatening—character, which sets it beyond the rules of neutrality and facticity.

The resurfacing of divisions in the field manifest at the level of journalistic organizations. The 1990s umbrella organization PERIODISTAS dissolved early during Kirchner's term. After 2008, journalists sympathetic to the media reform left the Foro de Periodismo Argentino (FOPEA), the successor professional association, perceiving it as captured by Clarín and established journalists allied with big media. Certain episodes made the field's divisions visible. By the end of Macri's presidency, *Clarín's* politics editor, a 1990s consecrated investigative journalist, co-founder of FOPEA and later a leading denouncer of Kirchnerist "corruption," was exposed holding "promiscuous" relations, allegedly involving him in extortions, with a criminally indicted intelligence community source. While one side saw the filings as a "maneuver" to criminalize "independent journalism," the other viewed in the attitude of closing ranks proof of the politically motivated double standard in the mainstream press (Schejtman & Becerra, 2019).

[4] http://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Julio-Blanck-En-Clarin-hicimos-un-periodismo-de-guerra.

Table 1. Parallelism in Argentine news consumption.

	Anti-populist media (%)					Pro-populist media (%)		
			Clarín Group					
	LN	Infobae	C13	TN	Clarín	TVP	C5N	P12
Voted for Macri	49	54	53	65	43	20	12	6
Voted for Fernández	17	37	24	29	15	45	63	33

Source: ESPOP (2020).

Another manifestation of the increased level of political parallelism was a trend during Macri's presidency and beyond for media professionals, many from Clarín newsrooms and with scarce previous political background, to attempt electoral political careers, mostly within the parties belonging to the anti-populist coalition.

A final manifestation of the new political parallelism can be found in patterns of audience use, which, from 2008 on increasingly aligned along partisan lines. Especially *Clarín's* outlets, which formerly had cultivated catch-all audience-maximizing strategies, switched to the cultivation of anti-Kirchnerism, thereby losing audiences at a faster pace compared to the mean decline of legacy media. Despite the fact that *La Nación* remains Argentina's paper of record (being read by politically informed publics and political elites transversally), it always had a conservative highbrow anti-Peronist core readership.

The audience partisan alignments that started to take shape from 2008, solidified with almost no variation at least until Javier Milei's presidential inauguration in 2023. A survey fielded in 2020, at the beginning of Alberto Fernández's presidency, shows how news audiences reflect the populism/anti-populism divide. As Table 1 shows, when asked about which outlets they regularly recur to for news content, those who had voted for the anti-populist coalition (Macri), and those that had voted for the populist coalition (Alberto Fernández) differed significantly in news outlet selection.

Studies on uses and engagement with news media online accounts and news sharing patterns in Argentina have shown an enduring pattern of polarized partisan online communities and news-sharing habits. Anti-populist users tend to share news from friendly media (especially *La Nación* and Clarín's 24/7 news network) and display shorter times to retweet their posts. Pro-populist users, meanwhile, tend to embed links to aligned news sites such as *Página12* (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). Media and journalistic cultivation of polarized audiences also created constraints. The confrontation with Kirchnerism led to widespread cultivation of partisan audiences with subsequent lock-in effects. Reportedly, those audiences exerted polarizing pressures on journalistic work. The host with the largest national radio ratings reported rating drops and angry complaints, each time audience-resisted Kirchnerists were interviewed (Fontevecchia, 2018). Similarly, the above-mentioned *Clarín* editor admitted the paper's vulnerability to strategic leaking, given the value ascribed by its readership to exposés on Kirchnerist corruption.[5] Later, with the electoral defeat of the anti-populist Cambiemos party in 2019, some celebrity journalists suffered shutdown campaigns or treason accusations from social media followers as they attempted to back away from anti-Kirchnerism. These hostile reactions reportedly drove them to swiftly pull back and re-affirm their anti-populist positions (Baldoni & Schuliaquer, 2020).

[5] https://www.perfil.com/noticias/medios/daniel-santoro-por-net-todo-lo-que-nunca-dijosobre-la-causa-del-espionaje-ilegal.phtml.

Anti-populist media and anti-populist political mobilization

Van Dyck (2019) makes the argument that anti-populist forces rarely succeed in building strong political parties, and rely instead on privileged access to the media as a substitute form of political mobilization. Argentina may be an exception to this pattern, a case where the active political role of anti-populist media facilitated the development of a strong anti-populist party. Recent research on the formation of the anti-Kirchnerist PRO/Cambiemos party considers it an example of successful party-building by conservative elites opposed to a left-wing populist government. Vommaro (2023) stresses a number of factors that account for the success story, including programmatic and organizational factors, but also the importance of the ideational struggle, in particular "the strategic use of a moral panic, associated with fear of redistribution, threats to private property, and the empowerment of personalistic leaders who hinder elite access to government, thus triggering the fears of the conservative electoral core. Through an epic narrative based on confronting this threat, leaders accelerate hesitant support and mobilize sectors that are apathetic toward the party." Party builders functioned effectively as "moral entrepreneurs" who tapped into extended fears through the threat of a radicalization that would lead the country to "become another Venezuela" and successfully harnessed the party's image as "the one that opposes" or "the one that protects us from" that destiny (p. 16). In previous work, Vommaro (2017) referred in this context to the role of "professionals of political opinion" in building this "epic narrative" that convinced important sectors of upper and middle strata to participate actively in politics.

Anti-populist media were certainly a central part of this process. Anti-populist-aligned media preceded and contributed to the political mobilization of the anti-populist coalition that defeated Kirchnerism in 2015. From 2012 to 2013, while the anti-populist media were shifting to a stage of more self-conscious and systematic effort to erode Kirchnerism politically, a new wave of massive anti-government protests took place. The mainstream media did not play a central role in promoting these "*cacerolazos*" and other mass actions; they were mainly driven and coordinated by expanding social media networks, especially on Facebook. However, the language around the mobilizing networked conversations clearly adopted the frames provided by the anti-populist media narratives, and the names of mainstream media journalists were frequently invoked in those interactions (Gold, 2017; Saferstein, 2021). A few weeks after the outbreak of the

agrarian conflict in Argentina in 2008, a long-time *columnista político* interpreted the events as follows:

> Kirchnerismo has done not little to be compared with Chavismo. The Venezuelan ruler has concentrated political and economic power as a result of the increase in the international price of oil. The Kirchners seem to imitate this model by appropriating most of the income from agricultural exports, under the pretext of a supposed redistribution of wealth, which, as in Chavista Venezuela, paradoxically, does not reach all vulnerable sectors.[6]

The dissemination and standardization of such narratives in the mainstream media preceded and paved the way for the strategic use of that essential "ideational" anti-populist party building resource. In those years before the negative identity developed into a positive partisan counterpart, buying and exhibiting a book by one of the celebrity journalists denouncing Kirchnerist corruption or authoritarianism functioned as a form of publicly taking sides (Saferstein, 2021). The later organizational success of the center right political party that would lead the Cambiemos anti-populist coalition, depended, as a necessary condition, upon the previous mobilization of the narrative that provided meaning to an anti-Kirchnerist identity.

Mainstream media CEO's or owners kept a distance from direct involvement in the coalition of elites that formed the PRO/Cambiemos party, though numerous informal linkages existed between media elites and the new partisan leaders through common social worlds and porous social milieus. Clearly, however, anti-populist media played a central role in creating a climate of opinion in which political mobilization in opposition to "*kirchnerismo*" was possible initially and sustainable over the long run, even with Kirchner out of power.

Ecuador

The Ecuadorean case is broadly similar to that of Argentina. As in Argentina, the Andean country began the twenty-first century with a deep financial and economic crisis, experienced an equally deep political crisis, and saw the rise of a charismatic, media-savvy populist leader, Rafael Correa. President Correa challenged the country's status quo, reestablished the government as an active player in the national economy, and promoted a wide range of media policies, including the Communication Law, one of the most radical pieces of media legislation in the region, much broader in its scope than the legislation passed under Kirchner government in Argentina. A strong populist/anti-populist split in both politics and the media developed during Correa's presidency and continued to structure media and politics following the end of populist rule. The main difference between the two cases is that the full manifestation of the new political parallelism in the media did not emerge in Ecuadorean journalism until after Correa was out of power, a difference we attribute primarily to content regulations under the Correa era communication law, although the structure of Ecuadorean media markets and the government's power relative to media companies may have also played a different role compared to the Argentinian case.

[6] https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/hay-humo-en-el-horizonte-kirchnerista-nid1005390/.

The roots of Correa's rise after the 2006 presidential election can be found in the decline of the so-called neoliberal "Washington consensus" that dominated the country since the 1980s. As in other Latin American countries, Ecuador's adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1980s resulted in low and unequal economic growth, in clear contrast with the economic performance between 1950 and 1980 (Munck & Luna, 2022; Rodríguez, 2021). Liberalization and deregulation of the financial sector contributed to a massive bank run, the so-called *Feriado Bancario*, in 1999. In a matter of days, millions of Ecuadoreans lost their savings. Emigration increased exponentially, and millions of families were torn apart.

The media did not provide accurate, open coverage of these events, nor did they cover concerns about the state of Ecuadorean financial institutions that led to the crisis. Citizens, already exhausted by years of austerity, became increasingly distrustful of both government and mainstream media. Alternative radio stations–notably Radio La Luna, a crucial media actor in those years (Velasco, 2000)—played an important role as a source of information and social mobilization around the *Feriado Bancario*. In the years that followed the *Feriado*, the country saw the two main television broadcasters, TC Television and Teleamazonas, blame each other for the financial crisis. Both broadcasters, owned by banking moguls, were blatantly instrumentalized to work for their owners' reputations using disinformation tactics to accuse each other in prime-time news shows, a classic example of the pattern (Guerrero & Márquez Ramírez, 2014) describe as characteristic of the "captured liberal" media system. This period is commonly referred to as the "War of Channels" (Kitzberger, 2016b; Reyes, 2010).

In the midst of these events, a populist candidate, Lucio Gutiérrez, with the help of the well-organized indigenous movement, won the 2002 presidential election promising to change the course of the country. No significant change occurred, however; Gutiérrez signed another agreement with the International Monetary Fund, and the Indigenous movement left the national government. In 2004, after Gutiérrez allied with Abdalá Bucaram, a conservative populist leader who briefly held power in 1996-1997 receiving strong rejection from mainstream media (De la Torre, 2015), a wide range of parties and social organizations promoted his resignation. This finally happened after the so-called *Rebelión de los Forajidos* in Quito in April 2005. Inspired by similar protests in Argentina in 2001, and prefiguring subsequent leaderless movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States or the Indignados protests in Spain in 2011, the *Forajidos* fostered a deep political crisis that ended with Gutiérrez's deposition. Alternative media, including Radio La Luna, and innovative political communication techniques played an important role in Gutiérrez's fall (Ramírez, 2005a). A new government was appointed headed by Gutiérrez's vice president, Alfredo Palacio. The finance minister chosen for that administration was a young "*forajido*" and heterodox economist with frequent contributions in alternative media, Rafael Correa.

Following the 2005 events, Ecuador's national institutions (including the executive branch, the parliament, political parties, business organizations or the media) were strongly discredited in the eyes of public opinion (Ramirez, 2005b). Ecuador suffered the kind of "representation crisis" that, as many scholars have argued, create the conditions for

populism to thrive (Laclau, 2007; Roberts, 2019; Vergara, 2020). Correa, who served as an anti-neoliberal Finance Minister in the new cabinet, presented his candidacy for the 2006 presidential election, running a campaign full of innovative communication techniques, including pioneering use of the Internet and the production of an original campaign introducing popular culture topics, including videos emulating Star Wars themes, to mobilize the electorate against the traditional political class (De la Torre & Conaghan, 2009). He competed in the runoff with another political outsider, the conservative populist banana business mogul Alvaro Noboa.

Media policy changes under Correa

Correa, who, like many populist leaders in the initial period of their rise to popularity, enjoyed the support of many mainstream news outlets and journalists, won the presidency promising a sharp political and economic change, and immediately pushed for the passing of a new Constitution in 2008. Correa and his political allies introduced major institutional reforms, invigorated the role of the government in the economy, and presented key media policies. Following a brief coexistence with established media, the leftist president began to enter into conflict with the mainstream press. Correa developed his own television show, *Enlace Ciudadano*, a weekly program that presented the government's policies and actions, becoming a competitor to the mainstream media in the role of interpreting day-to-day political reality. *Enlace* evolved over the years to a fully produced show, with different sections and varied content, hosted by Correa himself, including a segment to evaluate domestic media coverage called "Freedom of expression belongs to everyone." *Enlace* was seen by journalists and media actors as one of the major points of symbolic clash between private media and the government (Palos Pons, 2022, pp. 167–181). Correa also contested the media's negative coverage by suing news organizations and individual journalists. Teleamazonas and *El Universo* were the main targets of his critiques and libel complaints, although the populist president began to confront mainstream commercial media in general.

Correa's antagonism with private media appeared at specific moments in 2007, but it became central in Correa's politics in 2008, during discussions for the new Constitution. It was in that year when public television and radio were introduced for the first time in Ecuador's history. In that year, also, Correa seized the assets of the Isaias Group to pay off the group's debt with the Ecuadorean state. Among these assets was TC Television, which was put under the control of the state. Correa also created a stronger infrastructure for telecommunications and digital media services, and introduced the first regulations on media ownership, including a ban on ownership by financial institutions.

Finally, after years of conflicts, Correa gained enough parliamentary support to pass a Communication Law in 2013 that set up a new regulatory framework for media actors, including cultural industries, although digital media were not directly covered. The law included regulations not only of media markets and labor conditions, but also of media content, in contrast with most of the reforms in the region. The law introduced the right of reply and rectification –which proved to be central in governmental monitoring of news–, presented deontological principles for journalism and incorporated a requirement of five percent of content dedicated to multi-cultural issues (information about indigenous or Afro-Ecuadorean communities, for example). Provisions regarding sex and violence in media content, journalists' educational qualifications and work conditions were also addressed. Two important regulatory bodies were created: Consejo Ecuatoriano de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación (Cordicom), which monitored allocation of frequencies, and Superintendencia de Comunicación (Supercom), which enforced those policies and had the power to sanction media for violations.

Formation and growth of political parallelism

As in the case of Argentina, during the period of populist rule Ecuador's media system was divided into two big camps: public media (supporting the government's stances) and private media (representing the political opposition). This situation consolidated especially during Correa's last term (2013–2017) evidenced in the distinct political bias represented by Ecuador's private and public media (Chavero & González, 2021).

In terms of media content Ecuador was characterized during the period when Correa was in power by a polarized but plural public sphere, where private media generally represented a conservative anti-*oficialista* world view, while public media promoted the government and progressive views. Private media took a generally oppositional stance toward Correa, and longitudinal content analysis of the most important newspapers of the country (Palos Pons, 2024) found that polarization increased during Correa's presidency. Correa's government was depicted in much critical reporting as suspect of corruption and as an authoritarian or dictatorial government supported by the uneducated or acritical masses. Correa was seen as the center of all evil by most of these pieces. Many media also moved toward more consistently conservative stances on the left-right scale. As no explicit political parallelism could be found in the pre-Correa era, in the context of an unstable party system and a conservative media deeply inspired by the American liberal media model, the polarization of the Correa era set up a new sort of political parallelism absent before the emergence of the populist/anti-populist divide (Palos Pons, 2024, p. 8).

In the Ecuadorean case, however, a full shift toward highly partisan "war journalism" did not occur during the period of Correa's rule. Sharp conflict between Correa's government and private media did happen during Correa's first terms, especially after the 2008 Constitutional referendum (Palos Pons, 2022), and private media behaved aggressively against the new president, especially broadcaster Teleamazonas and *El Universo* newspaper. By Correa's last term, however, while media had a clearer ideological stance and content critical of the government was higher than in the pre-Correa period, there was also a strong presence of neutral stories based on official sources. In contrast to the source endogamy of Argentina, the number of sources used in news content increased strongly (22% compared to the period before Correa's presidency), and they became more diverse, including more views from experts, unions, or association leaders. Also in contrast to Argentina, separation of news and opinion became stronger (Palos Pons, 2024, pp. 9–10). While in Argentina the polarization that accompanied populist rule seemed clearly to undermine professional norms, in the Ecuadorean case many of the journalists interviewed saw an increase in professionalism during the Correa era (Palos Pons & Hallin, 2021, pp 1032–1033). In the view of most of those

working in public media, the better quality of journalism resulted from positive rights granted by the Communication Law, such as the requirement of a university degree to work in the media, better labor conditions, deontological requirements, or the need of verification of sources. From the perspective of those working in private media, the improvement was a consequence of the extreme precautions taken by reporters, in the face of possible sanctions, to offer verified information supported by multiple sources to denounce the government or to clarify corruption cases. Many stressed the low level of journalistic professionalism before Correa.

One important reason that opposition media in Ecuador did not shift in a full and permanent way toward "war journalism" as in Argentina no doubt has to do with content regulation under the new communication law, something which was absent in the Argentinian case. The strongest anti-Correa content, sometimes very exaggerated and resembling more closely the anti-populist war journalism of Argentina, was to be found in opinion pieces, which were not covered by Supercom's rectifications and replies. It is also possible that the balance of forces between the state and the commercial media was different in the Ecuadorean case, where even an important commercial corporation, TC Television, was controlled by the government. Traditionally, Ecuadorean media markets consolidated around two big poles, Quito and the Sierra, and Guayaquil and the Coast, and media were controlled by a few families, some related to media business and some linked to financial institutions or other types of businesses (Checa-Godoy, 2012; Gehrke et al., 2016; Jordan & Panchana, 2009). In Ecuador, the fragmented media market never produced a dominant media power like Grupo Clarín or the big conglomerates of Mexico or Brazil. Media elites may, therefore, not have felt they were in a position to oppose the government as strongly as in the Argentinian case.

As in Argentina, however, journalists in Ecuador increasingly became divided into two camps. Journalists in the public media generally rejected the charge that Correa's policies put press freedom in danger –many felt that a "free press" had never existed fully in Ecuador– or that Correa was creating a dictatorship, while journalists working for private media saw a grave assault on press freedom and considered Correa an authoritarian and corrupt politician. However, interviews with journalists and policy-makers also revealed significant areas of agreement across these lines of division: most, whether for or against Correa, agreed that Ecuadorean media needed to be regulated due to a very problematic past; most supported the establishment of public media, although they complained of its lack of independence under Correa; most also criticized Supercom's content regulation as highly problematic (Palos Pons & Hallin, 2021).

Political activity of media professionals clearly increased during Correa's presidency, even if the Communication Law forced journalists to adopt neutral stances in news reporting, to show a more diverse range of voices in their stories, and to verify their sources. Teleamazonas, *El Universo*, *La Hora* and many other media outlets voiced a specific political position against the government, a practice that was not evident before the Correa era. On the other hand, journalists working in public media adopted an explicit conception of journalism as a political activity, challenging the classic liberal, "high modern" (Hallin, 2006), model of journalism which marks a neat differentiation between journalism and political or partisan activism. There were cases of journalists running for elections, or who decided to merge their professional careers with politics in the conservative, *antioficialista*, and progressive, *correista*, camps, as with Carlos Vera, a former host for Ecuavisa, who launched his candidacy for the 2013 election. Another significant case was the story of Fernando Villavicencio, a former leftist journalist, who became a fierce anti-*correista* activist for years before running for president in the 2023 presidential election. Villavicencio would be killed ten days before that election, for unknown political or criminal motives. Commercial media, seven years after Correa left power, blamed the former president and the *correista* camp for this crime, representing, as we will see below, a clear case of anti-populist campaign driven by the media so central in Ecuadorean politics with or without populist Correa in power.

Media after Correa: The anti-populist coalition

Correa was succeeded in office in 2017 by his former Vice President, Lenin Moreno, who quickly broke with Correa's policies, embracing a conservative agenda and reversing Correa's media policies. Guillermo Lasso, a neoliberal banker who had competed against Correa several times, won the 2021 presidential election and succeeded Moreno. Correa's political party, Alianza País, was dismantled during the Moreno presidency, and Correa himself, like many political leaders associated with him, was prosecuted for corruption and fled for exile abroad. However, political figures loyal to Correa reorganized as the Partido de la Revolución Ciudadana and continued as the principal political opposition. The figure of Correa continued to define the central axis of political cleavage in Ecuador, and the political parallelism that emerged during Correa's presidency became even stronger with Correa physically out of power and the country and the media law out of force (Palos Pons, 2024, pp. 9–10). Moreno, and after him Lasso restored friendly relations with commercial media, consistent with the collusive, transactional relationships that commonly prevail in Latin America. The Communication Law was deeply reformed in 2019, reestablishing commercial media's dominance, and repealing the mechanisms of content regulation; important provisions remained to promote community media since Moreno's administration received support from the indigenous movement. Lasso's administration basically reinforced the neoliberal turn that Moreno took, and further reformed the Communication Law in 2022 making more difficult to exercise measures such as the right of reply and rectification; only concessions to community media (and the indigenous movement) were kept. With the Communication law dismantled and Correa out of power, anti-*correista* partisanship in the media became much stronger, resembling the "war journalism" of the Argentine case. As in Argentina, the strong political parallelism that persisted after populist rule was highly asymmetrical, as pro-Correa journalists were purged from public media during the Moreno administration, and populist voices had to move into the margins of the media system.

With Correa out of power, coverage of Correa and his movement became increasingly either invisible or negative in mainstream media and even in so-called alternative digital media. For instance, news articles analyzed during Moreno's administration (Palos Pons, 2024) did not offer space to sources close to Correa nor did they cover *correismo*'s views on trials against this political movement's leadership, including criminal cases against Correa himself. Opinion pieces tended

to represent mostly conservative voices, many of them supporting neoliberal mantras against state regulation and intervention, praising the market, etc, and they consistently depicted Correa as a "dictator" and a "totalitarian," and accused him of massive corruption and connections with drug traffic gangs. Neutral reporting on Correa or topics related to government or the pro-Correa party became scarce. At the same time, private media rallied with the government, with critical coverage declining substantially from the Correa period. Watchdog reporting became rare; for example, in 2019, when massive protests triggered by increasing fuel taxes took place, mainstream media rallied with the Moreno government and supported the narrative that centered around Correa as a threat to the stability of the nation. Something very similar happened in other national protests in 2022 regarding increases in fuel taxes.

During interviews with journalists during the 2023 presidential campaign, this strong anti-populist stance was confirmed and detailed. For instance, an important editor-in-chief of *Primicias*, the most important digital outlet, explained that their policy was to not give any space to politicians sentenced for corruption, such as Rafael Correa and other *correista* leaders. Another very experienced Ecuadorean journalist, at the time of the interview working as stringer for the *Washington Post*, declared that the situation for Ecuadorean journalism was way worse than with Correa in power and that the Correa/anti-Correa antagonism established in the media was problematic. Most of those interviewed, including journalists or editors employed at *La Posta*, Telesur, Teleamazonas, *El Universo*, or *La Hora*, recognized this cleavage. Some of them, such as *La Posta*'s editor, Luis Vivanco, in our interview with him (Aug. 16, 2023), expressed rejection towards the Correa/anti-Correa divide he described as dominating the public sphere and media performance:

> It has been seven years since Correa left … But [*correismo*] continues to be a discussion that contaminates all the conversations … For the press, what Moreno's administration represented was [the guarantee of] "no Correa return" and they started to enter into a sort of paranoia in which the only thing that matters is that … If the president is doing very badly and it is necessary to say something [the press say] "no, no! that benefits Correa, better not to publish anything!" It lowered [the press] quality enormously, annulling journalistic investigation, and the big media limited themselves to be reporters of the weather and traffic lights of the city … During Lasso's government this reached its maximum expression.

Probably this situation harmed public trust in the media. Confidence in media peaked in 2016, with Correa in power, according to Latinobarometro's opinion polls, and has declined since to historical low levels.[7]

Public media continued publishing and broadcasting information voicing leftist or progressive values for some years during Moreno's presidency, but Correa and *correismo* were heavily criticized, and Moreno's government was exalted. Little by little progressive voices and relevant journalists that had worked in public media during Correa's presidency were ousted or not invited to contribute. Meanwhile, Correa and the *correista* camp took refuge in alternative media or in Correa's interviews for the international press. Only a handful of local radio stations and YouTube shows supported *correismo*. This absence of coverage of *correista* views is striking, as Correa's party became the most important political movement in the national assembly in 2021 and from 2023 was ruling the two most important cities and regions in the country. *Correismo* only controls directly Radio Pichincha, a public radio and online site broadcasting to the Pichincha or Sierra region.

As in Argentina, newsrooms have become more homogeneous in the political/ideological color of journalists and writers. Given the ejection from public media of progressive voices and journalists close to Correa, the situation now is one of more consistency at least in views against *correismo* in commercial media. These views, centered around a dominant anti-populist rhetoric, cut across old political lines, putting together some progressive voices, journalists and writers close to part of the indigenous movement and the vast majority of the conservative camp, traditionally divided between Quito and Guayaquil. Old "populist" figures, such as Bucaram or Gutiérrez have joined forces with this coalition with statements, interviews, and frequent media appearances.

Ecuador never had the kind of shift toward liberal journalistic professionalism that occurred in Argentina in the period after the transition to democracy, although, as noted above, despite the polarization of Correa's presidency and the widespread view that press freedom declined in that period the Correa era was characterized by shifts toward more rigorous professional practices. In the post-Correa period, however, the full development of anti-populist partisanship resulted in univocal coverage, decreased watchdog reporting, and also a surge in highly exaggerated and poorly sourced reporting. For instance, Lasso defined *correismo* as "narcopolitics" before the 2023 regional elections and failed referendum. Mainstream media basically went with the flow of this with little concern about evidence, as they did with claims about links with *guerrillas* in Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela and claims of a *correista* link to the murder of the anti-*correista* journalist and presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio. Another constant topic used in anti-populist rhetoric is the discussion of the causes of the insecurity crisis in the country; mainstream media usually blame policies passed during Correa's presidency as the source of the urge of drug gangs and insecurity, even if evidence shows Correa's era as one of the most peaceful periods in Ecuadorean recent history. The dominance of the anti-populist narrative is illustrated by the coverage of the invasion of the Mexican embassy in Quito, carried out to arrest Jorge Glas, Correa's former Vice-president, who had taken refuge at the Mexican diplomatic mission alleging political persecution, widely condemned outside of Ecuador. Ecuadorean mainstream media, supporting the action of the Noboa government, framed the event as an issue created by the former populist leader: "*correismo* unleashes another diplomatic crisis," television broadcaster Ecuavisa posted the day after the invasion.

Anti-populist media and anti-populist political mobilization

In contrast to Argentina, anti-populism did not lead to the formation of a specific party or a formal political coalition in Ecuador. Anti-populist forces became competitive in Ecuador given Correa's relative loss of popularity since 2017, and appeals to vote against *correismo*, led by the mainstream

[7] Latinobarómetro Surveys 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2023. Retrieved at: http://www.latinobarometro.org.

media, have sufficed to articulate electoral majorities in run-off elections. Ecuador's anti-populist camp, however, has had greater difficulty to build a more stable political organization. The reasons for this may lie in preexisting and deep-seated regional, ethnic and political divides that fragment Ecuador's traditional political elite. Thus, in 2021, Lasso won the presidency in a runoff with 52% of the vote over the Correa candidate (Navia & Umpiérrez de Reguero, 2021), but his presidency failed and his party, CREO, collapsed. This dependence on the founding leader's fortune seems to evidence the limited party building process comparted with Argentina's anti-populist coalition. The political outsider Noboa capitalized on Lasso's defeat and was successful in attracting the support of the anti-*correista* vote in 2023. It remains to be seen if he manages to build a stable political base.

In any case, the role played by the media in creating and disseminating an anti-populist narrative and identity was as central as in the Argentinian case or even more given the lack of strong political organizations. We should at least differentiate two moments in the production of this process: during Correa's presidency, where an idea of defense of press freedom and liberal democracy helped to create the anti-populist identity, and after Correa left power in 2017, when this identity adopted a more polarized and militant tone of avoiding Correa's return to power at all costs; in the second period discourses on press freedom and democracy gave way to messages about *correista* corruption and alleged links with narcopolitics as the root causes of the security crisis in Ecuador.

During Correa's first years basically all political organizations were fully discredited. This also happened with other social institutions, including the media; and during his first year of presidency Correa enjoyed more or less full capacity to implement his political project. In this context, the only opposition left to the new regime came from mainstream media, such as Teleamazonas or *El Universo*, and from domestic and international journalism associations, which portrayed Correa's government as a clear threat to press freedom and democracy. Probably it is safe to argue that these ideological themes helped to create an anti-populist coalition that at some point was able to erode Correa's enormous popularity, especially during the implementation of the Communication Law. In the 2017 presidential election, Correa's candidate, Lenin Moreno, won with a very narrow margin. Guillermo Lasso, the opposition's candidate, campaigned against Correa-Moreno for the sake of democracy and freedom of the press. We could say that the press was, at the same time, the main political theme *and* actor during that campaign.

Once Lenin Moreno assumed power, however, another anti-populist identity emerged. Moreno, who basically adopted the political opposition's program, quickly realigned his government with the mainstream media. With Moreno in power, and after him with Lasso and Noboa, a coalition between the vast majority of the national media and the government formed. And a campaign to depict Correa's presidency as a dark and corrupt period was fully implemented. Many political organizations adopted this discourse, including most of the indigenous movement and some progressive voices (Enríquez Arévalo, 2019). This coalition was successful in defeating *correismo* in the 2023 election, as noted above, but it remains unclear if it will result in a stable political party. Anti-populist media, in any case, have clearly, as in Argentina, played a key role in defining the opposition around which politics continues to be organized in a still organizationally-fragmented Ecuadorean political system.

Part II: Other cases: The populism/anti-populism divide across the region

In the preceding sections, we have seen that the cases of Argentina and Ecuador show many elements of a common pattern in the relation of media and politics during and following a period of left-wing populist government. This pattern involves a strong division of the media system between an anti-populist camp, encompassing most of the traditional commercial media, and a pro-populist camp aligned with the populist leader, accompanied by sharp changes in journalistic culture in the direction of greater partisanship. In both cases, we have argued, oppositional media have played central roles in articulating an anti-populist discourse which continued to structure both journalism and political competition for an extended period after the end of populist rule. In both cases, anti-populist political forces came to power following populist presidencies, and populist media, no longer enjoying state support, were largely marginalized, producing highly asymmetrical media systems, despite the continuing political relevance of populist movements. In this section, we review other cases in Latin America in which left-wing populist governments, came to power, with the purpose of determining the extent to which the Argentinian/Ecuadorean model can be seen as a general pattern, and also to consider factors that may account for variation among the cases.

Venezuela

Hugo Chávez was the first, the most radical and the emblematic exponent of left-wing populism in Latin America in the Pink Tide era. The Venezuelan case was not only the one in which populist/anti-populist media polarization achieved maximal intensity; Venezuela is also the case that inaugurated the cycle of media-government wars. However, Venezuela's polarization and media politicization is distinct in that it moved out of the sphere of democratic politics, first as the opposition turned to insurrection, then as the government achieved hegemony, and finally as the regime shifted under Chavez' successor Maduro to pure authoritarianism.

Chávez' rise to the Presidency did not occur in confrontation with the media. On the contrary, the media played a crucial role in the creation of the opinion climate that produced the electoral outcome of 1998. By the end of the 1980s, Venezuelan radio and television experienced an expansion that would make it the third largest sector in Latin America. Media conglomerates achieved sufficient autonomy to distance themselves from the traditional parties in the context of the incipient political representation crisis. Denunciation of corruption as a vehicle for mobilizing popular discontent towards the political class granted prestige and legitimized media as a counter-power. The anti-political climate encouraged by the media thus opened the way for outsiders of party politics to flourish (Cañizález, 2003; Samet, 2019, pp. 122–129).

While some media such as Globovisión, RCTV and *El Universal* exhibited an early antipathy towards Chávez, others such as Venevisión, Televen or *El Nacional*—although without making it explicit—decisively supported his candidacy by giving him visibility and favorable coverage. These players hoped for the continuity of the old logic of

accommodation between the State and the media that dominated the "Punto Fijo" democracy, under which two political parties, following a 1958 pact, dominated Venezuelan political life. Initially their expectations in terms of appointments and regulatory decisions seemed to be satisfied. However, after the first months of government, it became clear that Chávez had a political agenda of his own in which there was no room for the usual transactional logic. Thus, excluded from access to the State—from the "right to be co-opted"—almost all the major media aligned against the government (Lugo & Romero, 2003). Chávez' decision to break with the policy of accommodation led media to refocus on denouncing the government, a familiar journalistic role that had empowered them in the previous decade. With the traditional parties pulverized, these media became a magnet and forum for all discontents and dissidences.

Thus, the beginning of the political polarization process in Venezuela is the product of a mirror-like relationship that divided the country into two antagonistic camps. Chavez' populist mobilization—in which the private media are defined as part of the established power—is inseparable from a simultaneous anti-populist mobilization. Private media owners, editors and high-profile journalists had a key role in mobilizing opposition, radicalizing a discourse that thoroughly denied Chávez democratic legitimacy. Antichavismo mirrored Chávez's anti-establishment discourse in that each claimed exclusive democratic authority. Beyond editorials, reporting in private media news outlets was gradually subordinated to the task of eroding the government. Both identities rose in an antagonistic polarizing choreography (Enríquez Arevalo, 2020; González, 2021; Samet, 2019).

By the end of 2001, media elites joined a plot to remove Chávez by extra-electoral means (Hawkins, 2010; López Maya, 2005). Backed by one-sided and manipulated private media coverage, a putsch was attempted in April 2002. Beyond the anti-*chavista* rhetoric that spilled from editorials to comment in news, the channels covered exclusively opposition mobilization and completely silenced the voices of *chavismo* as the crisis peaked. On April 11, 2002, the channels broadcasted the conferences of the putschist Coordinadora Democrática calling for the resignation of the president while—by means of a deliberate editing montage—Chavista militants were shown shooting at the opposition crowd. In an operation commanded from Venevision's offices, Chávez was arrested in the early morning of April 12. The media announced his "resignation" and celebrated the new government. The following day, however, officials loyal to Chávez regained control while supporters massively took to the streets coordinated by some alternative media. It was after this failed episode that Chávez deployed radical policies to reshape the media landscape that would erect him as a regional inspiration and a menace.

There is not much controversy that during the early 2000s, the private mainstream media not only reflected political and ideological polarization, but actively promoted it, and the indicators of political parallelism we described in the Argentine and Ecuadorean cases were strongly present. Even Chávez-critical scholars and journalists noticed that journalistic ethical standards suffered heavily as evidenced from the politicized coverage of the critical 2002–2003 years of anti-*chavista* mobilization (Pérez-Liñan, 2009; Petkoff, 2002). Many observers have noted the tendency for reporters in Venezuela in this period to interview sources that aligned with their respective ideologies that we have referred to as source endogamy, as well as a tendency not to seek sources or verify information. This "disregard for veracity and balance" in news is "justified in some media under the pretext that we are living an 'exceptional historical' moment under the Chávez regime" (Bracho-Polanco, 2014, p. 195). That assumption of *exceptionality* was seen as relieving practitioners of the obligations of professional ethics, justifying "war journalism," as in Argentina and Ecuador. The (political) task of ousting the vilified/illegitimate government prevailed. These shifts were reflected in the growing presence of comment in news throughout all media platforms, in the loss of presence and standing of out-group voices in opinion and interview programs, in the implicit effective rules that "forced journalists and editors never to do the 'other side' a favor in news coverage" (Bracho-Polanco, 2014, p. 168). They were also reflected in hyper-politicized newsrooms with the migration of media workers increasingly determined by political affinity. Audience pressures were strongly perceived in newsrooms. Journalists tended to seek information to confirm specific points of view aligned with their own and their audiences' political beliefs (Bracho-Polanco, 2014, p. 143). As the public's judgements on media credibility and trustworthiness increasingly depended on their partisanship, some reporters and editors shifted correspondingly (Bracho-Polanco, 2014, p. 201).

After the 2002–2003 crisis, Chávez gradually leveraged his political hegemony to restructure the mediated public sphere. One element consisted of the strengthening of state-aligned media and the linkages constructed with alternative media sectors. Like a number of other populist leaders, Chávez also competed directly with the media to address the mass public through his popular weekly broadcast *Alo Presidente!* At the same time, the regime progressively closed down the airwaves and media spaces for anti-populist expression through a downsizing and neutralizing of private commercial media. This was possible because Chávez, facing a political opposition delegitimated by its close association with the old political class as well as its involvement in the coup plot against Chávez, was able repeatedly to win national elections with crushing margins. In this context, as Van Dyck (2019) notes, the media along with some business groups became in effect the core of the political opposition. As Cañizalez (2003, p. 33) put it, the Venezuelan opposition "continued to be a state of mind, without finding organic expression … The political vacuum was filled by the media. … " The electoral opposition partially reconstituted itself following the death of Chávez, winning legislative elections in 2015, as Chavez' successor, Nicolas Maduro became increasingly unpopular. After that, however, the Maduro government moved decisively toward authoritarian rule. The Venezuelan case thus parallels those of Ecuador and Argentina during the Chávez period, with the development of a strong populist/anti-populist division in the media system and a central role of anti-populist media in political life. But it ends differently, as the collapse of democracy prevents anti-populist forces from reestablishing hegemony either in politics or in the media system.

Bolivia

The Bolivian case is characterized by shifting relationships between the media and the government of Evo Morales and the MAS—Movement for Socialism, with its agenda of

indigenous empowerment and rhetoric of construction of a "plurinational state." The dominant commercial media initially played a strong role in opposition to the populist government, then shifted in the direction of "*convivencia*" or coexistence as the MAS consolidated its power, and finally shifted back toward an active oppositional role as the political hegemony of the MAS weakened.

Upon taking office, Morales pointed to the media as the main opposition. In his inauguration discourse, he pointed to the long-standing media treatment of indigenous people as "savages" and the links of established media to the neoliberal status quo ante. The MAS reformist agenda was initially confronted by the Spanish Prisa Group outlets (*La Razón*, ATB), the Grupo Líder media, mainly *El Deber* and *Los Tiempos*, and television network Unitel. In Bolivia, major television networks and newspapers are owned by the country's wealthiest families, strongly connected to the traditional parties that had governed Bolivia since the mid-twentieth century, many of them from the *Oriente* lowlands. The years 2006–2009 represented a stalemate between the new government and these traditional regional elites. In that juncture, some media owners, in line with elite agendas, radicalized editorial and opinion sections. These alignments, according to the existing literature on the Bolivian case, were not strongly manifested in reporting, but were much more so in the framings of headlines and in editorial and opinion pages, where an anti-populist narrative flourished. Lupien (2013) stresses that the private media sought to attack the legitimacy of the Morales government by framing its supporters as mindless, manipulable and poorly informed; in Bolivia, ethnicity and populism framings mix. The media response to indigenous autonomy invoked disdain and fear, tending to selectively feature elite views characterizing special "cultural rights" as irrational and "equality before the law" as rational. Broadcast news portrayed the political field as a confrontation between "pro-autonomy democrats" and "*masistas*," a term generalized to refer to government officials and violent demonstrators. While more professional in reporting, *El Deber*, "the voice of the oriental lowlands," was a central player (through its opinion pages) in the political mobilization of regional conservative-autonomism. Pro-government media contested the former, in turn, as "separatist oligarchs" (Schuliaquer, 2020).

Between 2008 and 2009, a recall election, a constitutional election and a general election took place. In all three, the MAS government-backed side won more than 60% of the vote. In that scenario, mainstream private media owners shifted away from their previous offensive strategies vis-à-vis government. They accommodated to protect their property, maintain access to state advertising and continue with their core –generally, non-media– businesses. Certain newspapers and television commentators persisted as critics of the government. But to a significant extent, political reporting shifted to "*periodismo de declaración*," passive reporting centered on public statements by official sources, guaranteeing the government media representation. Morales, who in the midst of the conflict had stopped talking to journalists, began once more to grant interviews. As Evo bluntly described the shift: "I used to feel that 80 or 90% of the media were my opponents. Now there are 10% or 20% of opponents left … " (Schuliaquer, 2020, pp. 382–383).

As the MAS' electoral hegemony declined, media opposition to the MAS government increased. This began to occur in 2016, and was sparked in part by a referendum that would have changed the constitution to enable Morales to be reelected beyond two terms, a referendum which Morales lost, though the Supreme Court later invalidated the term limitation. Conflict accelerated following the presidential election of 2019, in which Morales was initially declared winner, the election result was disputed, and police and military forces, backed by radicalized massive *antimasista* mobilization, forced the president to resign and leave for exile. Opposition senator Jeanine Áñez assumed the role of president and governed through a right-wing led *anti-masista* coalition up to November 2020. Conflicting interpretations of the November events re-polarized Bolivian politics. Some observers view the episodes of this period as a watershed constructing a new cleavage (Molina, 2019). The private media shifted strongly to active political mobilization, which involved not only owner alignments but newsroom politicization, with most mainstream journalists taking sides with the new interim government.

Bolivia shares with Venezuela an initial moment of crisis and media-government polarization, followed by a period of relative populist hegemony. However, Bolivia later switched to a radicalized anti-populist coalition, in government by extra-institutional means. The asymmetrical parallelism comes to the fore –as in Argentina and Ecuador- in terms of media representation of the populist party. The MAS returned to power in November 2020, under a different leader, Luis Arce, with 55% of the votes; but it did so despite its lack of mainstream media access, a communicative weakness it might have overcome through the robust social organization linkages that distinguish the Bolivian ethno-populist party from other Latin American cases, such as Ecuador under Correa (Resmini, 2023). The Bolivian case also resembles the others we have considered here in that the political opposition to the MAS was weak and fragmented, and, as one expert on Bolivian media put it to us, the media set the agenda of the opposition. After the MAS returned to power, media elites lowered confrontation though not to the level of the hegemonic phase; the current phase can be characterized as moderately polarized.

Bolivia thus shows elements of the pattern observed in Argentina and Ecuador; but in the Bolivian case media have backed away from confrontation with the populist government when its political strength has been highest. Schuliaquer (2020) suggests some possible explanatory factors. As noted in the case of Ecuador, one factor may be the relative strength of media industries: Bolivia has a small media market highly dependent (50% estimated ad budget) on the state. Schuliaquer also observes that the *denuncismo* tradition of anti-government watchdog journalism is mostly absent in Bolivian journalistic culture. Finally, in the case of Bolivia no media regulation radically threatened ownership structures. The Morales government shifted government advertising away from oppositional newspapers, though it mostly maintained it for television. It harassed media organizations in certain ways, and passed certain laws, including an anti-racism law, that provoked strong conflict with media, though most analysts think that these laws had limited effect in the end. It reestablished public television, created a daily newspaper, and made inroads in community media (Schuliaquer, 2020). But it did not attempt to change the basic structure of commercial media in the way the Chávez, Correa or to a more limited degree the Kirchner governments did. This may be to

a significant degree a result of the fact that the Morales government was based in a strong social movement, and due to its organizational communicative resources, never considered the media as a crucial component of its communication strategy in the way that Correa or Chávez did (Resmini, 2023).

Mexico

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) was elected in 2018, and fits strongly the standard model of populist leadership. His appeal is based on a strong rhetoric denouncing the "mafia of power" made up of corporate and political elites and presenting himself as a protector of the humble, honest citizens. He projects an image as a hard-working, honest everyman, and places great emphasis on performing direct communication with his broad political base and dramatizing the activation of that base, something which is carried out in large meetings and mobilizations, as well as through his early-morning press conferences, the *mañaneras*, a significant part of which is devoted to attacks on opposition media, including particular journalists, as corrupt defenders of the elite (Santillana & Davis, 2023). He has acted to undermine many institutional structures he portrays as corrupt and elitist, including, most recently, the National Election Institute and the judicial system. López Obrador is best classified as a populist of the left: his rhetoric, going back to the period when he was mayor of Mexico City, was critical of neoliberalism, and his base of support is made up primarily of the working and lower class, who have been the beneficiaries of key policies. There have always been debates over how to classify López Obrador in left-right terms, however, as his positions are not entirely consistent: he has supported austerity in fiscal policy, for example, and has taken positions usually considered conservative on some social issues, such as feminist protests addressing violence against women. Also, some pro-AMLO social media influencers promoted Donald Trump during the 2020 US election. Mexican politics is today highly polarized along a pro- and anti-AMLO axis, which has eclipsed traditional left-right and other cleavages.

AMLO has long had tense relationships with the dominant media, which were widely seen as favoring his principal opponent in the 2012 election, which he narrowly lost. Some changes in top management positions at certain media, according to experts we consulted, took place quickly after AMLO's elections, placing managers with strong anti-AMLO positions in charge. AMLO's rhetorical attacks on the media and on journalists once in office have heightened the tension with many media since he has been in power. As in the Argentinian and Ecuadorean cases, the Mexican case is characterized by a division between pro-AMLO media, which generally receive strong support from the state, including the traditional leftist newspaper *La Jornada*, state-run media, a number of recently-created media and an important concentration of pro-AMLO social media influencers. Anti-AMLO media include the traditionally center-right newspaper *Reforma*, *Proceso*, a magazine usually associated with the left, the digital *Animal Politico*, and other outlets, as well as prominent individual journalists. Some media on both sides of the divide are financed by politicians associated with AMLO's party Morena or with the opposition. The rhetoric of the anti-populist media centers around the charge that AMLO represents a shift back toward authoritarianism. AMLO and MORENA are charged with "*caciquismo* (bossism)," and often characterized as reconstructing the authoritarian methods of the former ruling party, the PRI. Opposition parties are weak. AMLO's party, MORENA, had a strong position politically during his term, with, for example, 22 of 32 state governorships. This means that, as in the Argentine case, certain anti-AMLO media, including *Reforma*, play a central role as political opposition, and as in Argentina and Ecuador, political competition is structured around the split between supporters and detractors of AMLO.

However, Mexico differs from the Argentine/Ecuadorean model in the fact that a large sector of the commercial media falls neither in the pro- nor in the anti-populist camp. Instead, these media, which include the major broadcasting organizations and the many of the major newspapers (*Milenio, El Sol de México, Excélsior*) stick to the traditional Mexican pattern of passive reporting based on government sources, with the consequence that AMLOs messaging tends to dominate the news. This is true of the principal news broadcasts on the major television networks, traditionally seen as central influences on mass opinion in Mexico. The picture for broadcasting is somewhat complicated, however, in that a number of prominent political commentators on radio and television (also including the satirist Brozo) have strong anti-ALMO stances, and talk shows directed at middle class audiences are important sites of anti-populist discourse.

The difference of the Mexican case from the Argentinian-Ecuadorean pattern is probably explained by two factors. First, while AMLO attacked the media rhetorically, competed with journalists for influence in the public sphere, and built some pro-government media to compete with established media, he did not change media policy significantly or attempt a fundamental restructuring of the media system. He did reduce the government public relations budgets, which subsidize media substantially, but did not dismantle the traditional clientelist system. Indeed, many commercial media continue transactional relationships with the government which provide them crucial revenue. Second, the balance of power between AMLO and the media is probably more in AMLOs favor—similar to the Bolivian or Venezuelan cases, and different from those of Argentina or Ecuador. AMLO enjoyed a very high level of political support, and the strength of MORENA meant that he was not as dependent as he might be on favorable coverage in the mainstream media. AMLO was prevented by Mexico's one-term limit from running for reelection, but his party won presidency and most offices easily in 2024. Meanwhile, the media are in a weaker position than in the Argentine case; newspapers have always been more marginal economically in Mexico, and the great television powers are in a weaker position than in the past—in 2021 Televisa was acquired by the US Spanish-language broadcaster Univisión.

Colombia

Gustavo Petro was elected in 2022, the country's first leftist president. The Colombian case is thus in a much earlier stage of development than the other cases analyzed here, and our analysis of that case is therefore necessarily tentative. Colombia is distinct in the region in the sense that there was a relatively stable political system based on two main political forces, the liberal party and the conservative party (which even governed jointly between 1958 and 1974) since the populist Rojas Pinilla dictatorship ended in 1957. In recent years, however, the party system has been increasingly volatile, and

populist actors have emerged, initially on the right, beginning with Álvaro Uribe, who came to power in 2002. Uribe had tense relations with parts of the mainstream media, journalists were frequently targets of his anger, and he adopted media-oriented political practices previously unknown in the country, traveling throughout the country organizing community councils broadcasted to the nation in a similar vein to the political broadcasts of Correa, Chávez or Lopez-Obrador (De la Torre, 2005; Fierro, 2014; Galindo Hernández, 2007).

Some of this situation persisted during the government of Ivan Duque (2018–2022), Uribe's protégé. According to interviews with journalists, Duque's institutional communication from the presidency of the republic was openly used for partisan purposes for the first time in Colombia's recent history, establishing a precedent to Petro's political communication. Contrary to the usual relationships between the government and the press, Duque clearly politicized public television and used institutional channels profusely, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report published by Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa in 2022,[8] aggressions against journalists increased during Duque's tenure, the president deliberately pushed to divide the public sphere between friends and enemies, and he tried to control the narrative at all costs.

As in other countries in the region, political crises have been common and intense recently in Colombia. The most important case of social protest occurred in 2021 with the so-called "*Estallido Social*" (social outburst), which marked the most massive protests in Colombian history (Ospina, 2023). The trigger was an unpopular reform on sales taxes affecting food and basic services. Additionally, problems accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of implementation of the 2016 peace agreements, concerns on the health care system and retirement model, and police brutality against protestors fostered demonstrations and strikes paralyzing the country. It was in the aftermath of those demonstrations that Petro won the presidency competing against far-right populist leader, Rodolfo Hernández.

Most journalists in the country had supported (and voted for) Petro as the solution for Colombia's numerous problems, and the new president promised to not call for a constituent process or any major overhaul of Colombian institutions; his reforms, Petro repeated, were liberal or social democratic policies, and he wanted to ally with traditional liberal leaders to pass legislation. However, after the first year of his presidency, and a deep reconfiguration of the political composition of his cabinet, relations between government and media started to deteriorate. Petro, whose rhetoric increasingly resembled other leftist leaders in the region such as Correa or Lopez Obrador, started to clash with critical journalists, and many news organizations and press associations, started to criticize Petro for what they characterized as attacks on the free press. In August, 2023 the Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, the leading newspaper in the Spanish speaking world with an influential newsroom in Bogotá and shared ownership of Caracol Radio, decried Petro's evolution "from being a conciliator to being a revolutionary." Some months before, in February, in the opinion pages of this same newspaper, originally a left/center medium, Jonathan Bock, the director of Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa, criticized the president in a piece entitled "Petro, the editor president." Block called attention to Petro's constant use of his Twitter account to assess or to confront journalists and wondered what the president thought about press freedom.

At the same time, *Semana* magazine, the news outlet with the largest audience in Colombia, became the most aggressive of all oppositional actors against Petro's government, playing an evident political role. Sold in 2020 to Grupo Gilinski, a financial conglomerate, the historic outlet changed its editorial line drastically, and turned into a sort of "Fox News a la Colombiana," adopting a business model that stressed the value of webpage views and clickbait numbers. *Semana's* editor-in-chief, Vicky Davila, became a notorious anti-Petro voice in the public sphere, at the same time of supporting many far-right populist leaders, such as former American president Donald Trump, Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro, or Argentina's president Javier Milei.

Petro's response has been supported by the usage of his Twitter account (he boasts 7.4 million followers, the fourth most followed leader in the Americas), institutional communication, community media, and public television. Canal Capital, (currently Capital), Bogota's local public television, was a major media project under Petro's tenure as mayor. Revamped as local non-commercial television in 2012, has been criticized as "political television" and "Petro's propaganda." The government also funded the creation of new public newspaper, *Vida*, in January 2024. Petro's government has been also accused of changing the traditional subsidies and institutional support for the mainstream press (Burgos, 2023).

After Petro proposed the convening of a constituent assembly in March 2024, the political positioning became even clearer and more consolidated. Petrismo seems to be supported by its party and other allies, some community media, public media, leftist alternative media and social organizations; the consensual approach employed during Petro's first year of government is gone. Anti-petrismo, on the other hand, seems to be composed by a wide range of oppositional voices. In electoral politics, Álvaro Uribe's Centro Democratico party (and social and organizations close to former rightwing leader) is clearly against any policy or action coming out from Petro's government. Something similar can be said for the more traditional liberal or conservative parties. On the media front, *Semana* magazine, very close to Uribismo, is one of the loudest voices against Petro. Mainstream media tends to offer negative coverage of the government. For instance, very critical coverage and unfriendly opinion pieces are common in *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, *Caracol Radio*, *El Pais* or *Caracol TV*, usually criticizing Petro's populism or his "authoritarian" or "polarizing" stances. Additionally, several progressive voices have joined the anti-petrismo camp, following a logic similar to other anti-populist camps in the region. For example, the prestigious online center/left outlet *La Silla Vacia*, known for watchdog reporting, shares an anti-Petro discourse, similar to the relationship between the leftist magazine *Proceso* and AMLO's government in Mexico.

However, notwithstanding the aggressive populist tone in *Semana*, mainstream media in Colombia show a stronger professional culture than in Ecuador or Mexico, something journalists we interviewed stressed. News pieces are supported by sources and documented, the difference between news and opinion is clearly signaled, and technical management is solid, evidence a profession that is not so

[8] See more at https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2006/04/16/uribe-debe-cesar-ataques-contra-los-medios-de-comunicacion.

underdeveloped as in many countries in the region. In this vein, it is not clear how rising polarization and the consolidation of a political parallelism in the press would affect journalistic professionalism. Petro's government has called for the development of public and community media to expand diversity and representation, but there are no plans in sight to pass new legislation regarding media regulation or to support independent media. In any case, the unusual gesture of Petro's long dissertation on journalism and related ethical principles published last February on the presidential institutional communication platform (Petro, 2024), speaks about the confrontation on journalism's ethics and professional values witnessed in Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, or more recently in Mexico.

In summary, the Colombian case is similar in several respects to the cases of Ecuador and Mexico. The previously-strong Colombian party system has become as weak and unstable as in most of the countries of the region (Meléndez, 2022, p. 39). Colombian and Ecuadorean electoral strategists share similar terms such as "*empresas electorales*" (Pizarro, 2002) or "*tiendas políticas*" to classify domestic politics, connoting an unrooted party system without strong social roots or ideological identities (Vidart-Delgado, 2017). With Petro's election as president, an expansion and consolidation of previous trends (which started with Petro being already a popular mayor in Bogota and opposition leader) took place, introducing a populist anti-populist divide in the public sphere, with mainstream media becoming some of the most oppositional actors against Petro's government adopting an increasingly strong political role. Thus, it is possible that the populism anti-populism divide, with anti-populist media serving as principal protagonists, will emerge as increasingly central in this context, though as of this writing it is too early to tell.

Brazil

The fit of the Brazilian case with the model we have described here is less clear than with other cases. The governments of "Lula" da Silva and the PT are generally seen as representative the institutional-party path within Latin America's left turn, in contrast to other cases of populist outsider mobilization (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). None of the PT-led governments achieved congressional majorities; they therefore had to rely on ideologically heterogeneous allies to pass legislation and did not attempt radical institutional reforms. They encouraged some debate over media policy, and engaged in some criticism of established media, but did not challenge the structure of the established media system. Lula was widely seen as a charismatic leader, and later in his presidency, as media turned more strongly against him, he backed away from press microphones and started touring the country, mobilizing unions and social movements and rallying popular support, and shifted toward somewhat increased use of rhetoric against elites. But Lula and the PT governments do not much resemble the populist governments of other countries studied here. Most media did, however, turn sharply hostile to Lula and the PT, and it is possible that we might describe Brazil as a case of anti-populism without populism. There was much more disagreement among scholars we consulted about whether the Brazilian case resembled the Argentinian case described by Kitzberger, but we summarize here a range of scholarship that suggests that it does, at least in part.

From the party's origin and around Lula's first presidential candidacy in 1989 the mainstream media generally portrayed Lula as a "leftist," a "radical," and eventually as a "populist" (Azevedo, 2018; Nava & Marques, 2019). Following a gradual de-radicalization process, Lula's professionalized 2002 campaign communicated a moderate message, promising continuity with the macro-economic orthodoxy. Newly credited as a pragmatist by much of the press, the president-elect signaled accommodation. The day after his election, Lula sat beside the anchor of TV Globo's flagship news program, commenting through the entire newscast (Kitzberger, 2016a; Porto, 2012). TV Globo provided initial positive coverage to the presidency of the leader it had traditionally opposed, though tensions with print media existed from the outset. Eventually the three most important newspapers *Folha de São Paulo* (FSP), *O Estado de São Paulo* (OESP), and *O Globo* (OG), the newsweekly *Veja*, and Globo's broadcast news, among the most important, converged editorially during Lula's first presidency around an antipetista/lulista alignment (Azevedo, 2018; Lima, 2006). The government counted on few aligned institutional media beyond a newsweekly (*Carta Capital*) and public broadcasters. As long as political-legislative alliance remained in place, the PT governments found benevolence in broadcast media controlled by evangelicals, such as TV Record.[9]

From June 2005 until the 2006 elections, a series of scandals shook Brazilian politics. The Mensalão scandal began with revelations by a federal deputy of a scheme consisting of monthly allowances to congressional representatives in return for legislative support. The scheme involved PT leaders and top government officials. This was followed by other scandals that dominated the news media. While Lula was ultimately re-elected in a runoff, the exposés had a high political cost: many of the president's close advisors had to resign, and the PT's image was severely tarnished. The Mensalão scandal ended the stage characterized relatively balanced opinion journalism linked to Lula's moderation. Reporting converged in an increased hostility towards both the president and his party. Corruption became the almost exclusive topic of political coverage. A *denuncismo* frenzy caught journalism, while moral categories dominated the frames used in political coverage. A second major period of polarization occurred during the presidency of Lula's successor Dilma Rousseff, a period of economic downturn in which significant social protest occurred. Rousseff was impeached in 2016.

It is in this period from the beginning of the Mensalão scandal forward, that many scholars see a pattern of highly active media opposition to the PT, expressed in framing the leftist government as essentially corrupted and in presenting it as morally degraded and beyond democratic legitimacy. Albuquerque (2016, p. 3051) cites an article quoting the President of the Brazilian Newspapers Association as saying that the press had a moral duty to act as a political opposition to the Lula government "reestablishing a political balance despite the weakness of the formal political opposition"—certainly a role similar to what we have described in other cases. Some scholars we consulted noted that they did not think the term "populist" was used frequently in Brazilian political discourse. On this point we would stress that anti-populist discourse as we have described it in these cases varies significantly in the specific terms used, sometimes referencing the term "populism" directly, sometimes referring to it

[9] TV Record later became a key media supporter of bolsonarismo.

indirectly by making comparisons to Chávez and other populist leaders, sometimes foregrounding themes related to corruption or authoritarianism, often accompanied with a narrative of the leader manipulating the masses. We would argue that as with populism itself, there is a kind of deep structure of anti-populist discourse expressed in different terms in different contexts. Thus Goldstein (2015) and Azevedo (2018) argue that from 2005 on, the PT was increasingly depicted as an essentially corrupt power perpetration machine, a characterization sometimes mixed with direct references to populism:

> The interpretative packages, which organized the "populist" or "corrupt" framing adopted by editorials, relied primarily on the concept "lulopetista", created by right-wing columnists since [...] the Mensalão scandal, constructed with a negative connotation and used repeatedly to characterize the party and its leaders. It takes up, as a new signifier, meanings used in other political moments, such as the expression "varguismo," which was employed to politically disqualify Brazilian labor in the 1950s or unionist populism in the 1960s. (Azevedo, 2018, p. 280)

At the peak of the crisis, Lula traced these historical parallels and self-compared with Vargas. He accused the opposition of *lacerdismo*, in reference to the journalist-politician who mobilized radical opposition to Getulio Vargas in the 1950s populist moment. *O Estado de São Paolo*, reviving its *antivarguista* lineage, considered that in his demagogic use of charisma, his tolerance towards corruption, and his alleged rejection of institutional forms, Lula surpassed "the father of the poor" (Goldstein, 2015, pp. 99–100).

The comparison with Chávez, and concerns about Lula's relations with Venezuela, were another frequent theme. Gagliardi and de Albuquerque (2021) show, for instance, that *O'Globo's* editorialists and columnists utilized the accusation of the PT as sharing a "Bolivarian DNA"—a reference to Venezuela—to justify Rousseff's impeachment. Albuquerque (2016) argues that elite suspicions towards the PT's power worsened as other Latin American countries turned to the left, and that one element of the media's critique of the PT had to do with "exotic alliances," as *O Globo* editorials characterized the PT's Latin-Americanist foreign policy, as opposed to what traditional elites saw as a tacit natural alliance with the Western countries. Another theme common in Brazilian mainstream media, according to much of the research, is that of anti-plebeian elitism. Lula is frequently depicted as unprepared. His voters are often characterized as "uneducated," "immature," and "manipulable." *O Estado de Sao Paolo* worried about Lula's incomplete schooling, vulgar provocation, and mistreating of the Portuguese language. Regarding his voters, the broadsheet constructed a picture, which lasted throughout the PT governments, of Brazilian society as divided between uneducated lower sectors supporting Lula vs better-informed middle sectors that understand the seriousness of corruption. "For some critics," Albuquerque (2016) writes, "the only possible explanation for [reelection] was Lula's exceptional communication skills and populist manipulation of masses, reminiscent of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez; accordingly, they coined terms like *lulismo* and *lulo-petismo* to describe his political style" (p. 3051). This fits with Ostiguy's analysis of anti-populist politics; de Albuquerque connects it with a wider argument that elites in Latin America, including media elites, see mass publics in the region as backward and immature, and see it as their role to intervene to guide democratic politics.

Much of scholarship in Brazil focuses on editorial and opinion journalism. A study of editorial position taking of *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* during Rousseff's impeachment process found that they similarly supported her impeachment, privileging arguments that highlight "corruption and patronage" as a main justification. These newspapers also defended the lawfulness of the impeachment procedure, therefore denying its interpretation as a coup (Marques et al., 2021). A comparison of *O Globo*'s editorials addressing Rousseff's impeachment with those addressing the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Melo in the early years of democracy's reintroduction reveals that the newspaper played a more active role in the former's case, and argues that the difference stemmed from the opposition of Rousseff's economic agenda (Pimentel & Marques, 2021).

Despite scarce scholarly attention compared to editorial politics, some similarities to anti-populist aligned newsroom political reporting practices, can be detected. Assumptions on the PT as inherently corrupt seem linked to forms of selective watchdog or one-sided coverage. "Beginning in 2005, coverage of the "Mensalão scandal" differed from that of previous scandals in two main aspects," writes Albuquerque (2016). "First, it had a strong partisan character, systematically describing the PT as an essentially corrupt political party. Second, it had extraordinary endurance, remaining a hot topic in media coverage for eight years .... Since then, only corruption scandals involving PT politicians have drawn full media coverage (p. 3052)." In their study of *Folha de São Paolo*'s coverage of the verdict in the Mensalão scandal, Biroli and Mantovani (2014) observe continuity in the angles and framing between news reporting and op-eds. A frame emphasizing the moral dimension of politics organized factual reporting. Without endangering its claims of internal pluralism and neutrality, this frame naturalizes a partisan narrative that, from 2005 on, portrays the PT as an organization that, despite its ethical claims, inherently resorts to criminal schemes to accumulate power. In a study of Jornal Nacional's coverage of Lula's criminal trial, Pérez and Romanini (2022) suggest that around the contentious sentencing of Lula, prime time news shows constructed an uninterrupted and coherent political narrative dominated by the journalists' voice privileging Judge Moro's documented and expert judgement.

It is not entirely clear from the existing literature how extensively newsroom compositions and professional organization was transformed in Brazil by the conflict between the media and the PT. But the controversies around mainstream media coverage in the run-up to the 2006 elections did result in resignations, firings and protests by journalists and media professionals working for TV Globo and other media (Lima, 2006; Porto, 2012). Prominently, Franklin Martins, a guerrilla fighter in the 1960s and JN columnist had his contract cancelled. After publicly attributing his dismissal to his refusal to join the news media's tone and allegations, Martins was appointed by Lula as Presidential Secretary for Social Communication, unmistakably signaling distance from the mainstream media (Kitzberger, 2016a). Schuliaquer and Moreira Cesar (2024), however, found that newsroom

diversity and professional solidarity across political lines persisted more strongly in Brazil than in Argentina.

In the other countries we have studied here, the populist/anti-populist divide continued to structure both politics and political reporting following the end of the left-wing government. In the case of Brazil, the consolidation of a new political parallelism around the populist/anti-populist axis was complicated by the rapid rise of right-wing populism in the person of Jair Bolsonaro, who denounced mainstream media as part of a corrupt elite much more strongly than Lula ever did. We will discuss the role of anti-populism in the rise of right-wing populism in a subsequent section. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that even after the Bolsonaro came to power, anti-PT discourses continued to have strong presence in the media. Gagliardi et al. (2022) found that the editorials of *Folha de São Paolo*, *O Estado de São Paolo* and *O Globo* portrayed the two candidates as equivalently dangerous for Brazilian democracy. The equivalence was sustained in the first years of Bolsonaro's presidency. "Brazilian newspapers have closely followed his actions. They constantly balanced his actions with the performance of the former PT governments" (p. 591). The authors additionally observe that the persistent uses of the expression "*lulopetismo*" in editorial pages, and the reactivated connections of the leftist leader and party to *chavismo* and *bolivarianismo*, indicated that the prestige papers considered Lula and the PT the more serious challenge to the liberal order.

The transnational dimension

The emergence of political parallelism based on the populism/anti-populism cleavage cannot be understood in its entirety without attention to its transnational dimension. Hallin and Mancini (2004) have argued that media system change is above all driven by transformations in politics and society, mainly internal in character. While such structural factors seem to be necessary conditions of change, the transnational flow of ideas has always been important in media history. Multidirectional international influences have always shaped journalistic culture and practice, either as a result of organized efforts or as a consequence of the intense interactions among media professionals. Interactions occur in unmediated forms, in gatherings or coverage, and in mediated form given that "journalists are heavy consumers of global media" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 258). All of them favor the diffusion of practices, values and narratives.

Diffusion certainly played a role in the "tide" or "wave" of leftist populisms emerging in Latin America, as Chávez's early success demonstrated the viability of certain alternative confrontational political strategies (De la Torre, 2017; Kneuer, 2020; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Wajner & Roniger, 2022). Cordial relationships and group identity among Pink Tide presidents also helped reinforce the diffusion of repertoires and learning mechanisms concerning media politics. As stated by an interviewed journalist who functioned as a media advisor to the Argentine presidency, early on, the Kirchners were extremely attentive to Chávez's counterhegemonic media strategies. The latter's example signaled the existence of confrontation with media elites as a political option. Several government officers, media reform activists and populist party-aligned journalists reported interacting through diverse networks and being attentive to related events in fellow countries to draw lessons to counter the "hegemonic" media (Kitzberger, 2010). The Chávez government also developed regional media policies consistent with its geopolitical views. The main initiative, besides supporting alternative media in some countries, was the creation of Telesur, the Caracas-based, multi-state satellite television news network, conceived of as both a vehicle for Latin American integration and a weapon against US-based information dominance (Cañizález & Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Zweig, 2013).

Anti-populism in Latin America, and especially the mobilizing role played by the media in it, similarly cannot be fully accounted for without considering its transnational dimension. As suggested above, that transnational story can be traced back to complex mutual influences in the academic, political and media fields among regional elites embattled against mid-20th century national popular governments in the Cold War context (Semán, 2021). These historical repertoires re-flourished and assumed new forms at the turn of the 21st century, dominated by the specter of *venezolanización*.

In the 1940s–50's Perón's regional and international image as a populist dictator was forged in the heat of the conflict with the press, and this process involved a transnationally networked interpretive community formed by the commercial dailies within Argentina in interaction with international news agencies and foreign correspondents which reinforced their frame of Peronism as inherently authoritarian and anti-democratic. The foreign correspondents' understanding of events was powerfully influenced by local journalistic sources. International agencies mostly functioned physically in local newsrooms. At the same time, the reporting and editorials of foreign prestige media, based on those sources, were profusely cited and reproduced by the local press as authoritative judgements (Cane, 2011; Rein & Panella, 2008).

The apex came in 1951 with the closure of *La Prensa*, the country's most successful commercial paper controlled by a family of the rural oligarchy. The closure turned into a *cause célèbre*. Alberto Gainza Paz, *La Prensa's* exiled owner-editor, started an international campaign to condemn Peronism. His epic narrative of resistance was widely echoed by US media, and he progressively grew into a regional living symbol of Cold War press freedom crusades. He became a prominent member of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), a consortium uniting US and Latin American owners and editors to promote the American liberal model of journalism and press freedom. *La Prensa*'s conflict with Peronism turned into a repeated cautionary tale for the organization that since the 1950s blacklists countries it deems as failing to uphold freedom of the press. Despite its claim to defend press freedom against any form of tyranny, its critics have accused IAPA of defending the economic positions of supposedly victimized owners that agitate against popular governments in the court of international public opinion (Cane, 2011; Gardner, 1965; Knudson, 1973).

The region's mid-20th century populist experience left at least two reinforcing legacies in terms of anti-populist media alignments that resurged in the 2000s. One operated at the level of discourse and journalistic meaning construction, the other at the level of inherited regional networks that remobilized with leftist-populist resurgence. Classic anti-Peronist press narratives framed populism as a natural enemy of press freedom. That original press narrative was uncritically adopted by academia and later bounced back from academia into journalistic discourse (Cane, 2011). As historian James Cane (2011) noticed, (particularly journalism) scholars

have left the narrative put forth by the anti-Peronist press of a "sudden authoritarian intromission into the otherwise progressive development of an internally coherent, autonomous press" (pp. 3–4) largely unchallenged. From Chávez's first clashes with the media on, those narratives revived and flourished in journalistic meaning construction.

The transnational dimension of post-Left-turn anti-populism in Latin America is strongly dominated by the Venezuelan case and the figure of Hugo Chávez. Venezuela is not only a case of early and extreme polarization and parallelism around the populism/anti-populism cleavage; its radical and eventually authoritarian turn made Venezuela a symbol especially, though not exclusively, mobilized by the anti-populist camps in each of the countries. Using survey data, Sagarzazu and Mouron (2020) have shown the divisive character of the perceptions of *Chavismo* in the region's countries with left-wing incumbents, therefore becoming a wedge issue capable, when strategically deployed, of mobilizing and uniting the camp of government opponents.

In his study of the rise of Argentina's electoral coalition that defeated Kirchnerism in 2015, Vommaro (2017) argues that professionals of political opinion were central to that process of antagonistic construction centered on the "specter of Chavism," which conveyed the idea of the country inexorably sliding toward a Venezuelan-like statist authoritarian populism unless Kirchnerism was defeated. That existential threat, a sort of "moral panic," reinforced an "us or them" decoding of reality that mobilized upper and middle strata politically from 2012 on. The threat of *chavización* or *venezolanización* became thus commonplace in regional anti-populist press narratives. Venezuela's case repeatedly appears as a cautionary tale for fate of liberal democracy in general, and press freedom in particular.

The common regional framing of domestic political leaders such as Correa, the Kirchners, Morales or even Lula as part of a wider populist threat in the regional media is linked both to organized efforts and to intense interactions among regional media professionals. Regarding organized efforts to coordinate the region's established press political agendas, *chavismo*'s emergence actualized long-standing regional press networks and organizations, such as IAPA, in their regional anti-populist watchdog role. The mobilization of regional anti-populist press efforts further advanced through the creation of the Grupo de Diarios de America (GDA) by a subgroup of IAPA members. Created in the 1990s as an advertising-marketing vehicle, the Miami-based network switched to political ends with the Left turn. Especially, around Chávez's counterhegemonic momentum, GDA promoted a regional agenda, through its collaborative dossiers, to warn against the threat to press freedom and liberal democracy posed by expanding Bolivarianism (Albuquerque, 2019; Gagliardi, 2017).

Throughout the interviews with journalists in Argentina, Ecuador and Brazil by one of the authors, it became evident that the professionals in the newsrooms were aware of and followed the coverage of the conflicts between the media and the governments in the other countries, drawing frequent analogies and deriving lessons. A prominent example of such regional influence is that of Jorge Lanata, an Argentinian celebrity journalist hired in 2013 by the Clarín Group who linked denunciation of corruption to discourses about Kirchnerist authoritarian-populism, thereby expanding the anti-populist narrative through television and radio newsshows to wider publics. His television show became widely known among the region's journalists as a success story. Lanata was frequently invited to conferences throughout the region to discuss the prospects of journalism and the fight against corruption under populist governments.[10] He also received awards by institutions such as the Colegio de Periodistas de Caracas or the Ecuadorean city of Guayaquil, whose mayor was a stark *anticorreísta*. Such occasions granted him profuse coverage by the local media.[11] In a previous interview with one of Ecuador's most renowned investigative journalists, Lanata stated that "populism has several common elements in all countries where it occurs. First, it takes the press as an enemy. … then there are particular characteristics of each of the governments, in some cases with a more authoritarian military culture, as in Venezuela, or with a more sophisticated domination, as in Ecuador or Argentina. In essence, they are regimes that resemble each other."[12]

As with the case of Perón, the development of a transnational anti-populist network actors in the United States and the wider Western world, including the Knight Foundation and the IAPA and GDA, as mentioned above. The latter are both based in Miami, a city that during our period of interest developed as an oppositional media hub vis-à-vis Latin American Pink Tide/populist governments. Gagliardi (2017), enumerates the juxtaposition of factors including its long-standing anti-communist Cuban immigrant community and the incorporation in the 2000s of newcomers that fled the Pink Tide regimes to the Latino community, especially from Venezuela. Becerra and Lacunza (2012) note that documents disclosed by Wikileaks showed that US Embassies in Latin America were widely perceived by regional media elites as friendly sites to shed complaints and critique against populist/left governments. Regional journalistic elites found resonance for discourses portraying populist governments as threats to press freedom and liberal democracy in these kinds of institutions, and were able to make use of networks, sponsored by the US, Western countries or transnational organization as forums to scale up, and to gather resources, support and legitimacy against populist/leftist governments. As with every such movement, the availability of networks, even if not necessarily created to pursue the specific agenda of that movement, is a precondition for transnational mobilization.

As we have seen, anti-populist movements, with media in a prominent leading role resemble each other around the region, in part due to intensive transnational interaction. And while the common pattern of media-politics parallelism is certainly conditioned by similar endogenous political developments, important exogenous diffusion effects at the level of both political elites and media professionals have been important shapers of the phenomenon.

[10] See, for example: https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/137555/la-batalla-entre-periodismo-y-populismo-en-america-latina.html; https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2017/01/14/nota/5995594/lanata-tengo-argumentos-rebatir-correa/.

[11] See, for instance: https://www.eluniverso.com/opinion/2016/10/28/nota/5877508/lanata-azote-corrupcion/; https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2016/10/28/nota/5877679/lanata-dice-que-no-haria-periodismo-ecuador/;https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/periodista-argentina-jorgelanata-leyes-libertaddeexpresion.html; https://www.expreso.ec/actualidad/lanata-ldquo-estaria-preso-ecuador-rdquo-57052.html.

[12] https://www.planv.com.ec/historias/sociedad/jorge-lanata-el-periodismo-tiene-que-ver-con-desobedecer.

Part III: Discussion: The logic of anti-populism, political parallelism and mediatization

In this final part we turn to a set of conceptual issues in comparative analysis of media and politics raised by the pattern we have described across seven Latin American countries. In the first section, we return to the literature on populism, and ask to what extent that literature describes a logic that also applies to anti-populism. In the second section, we delve more deeply into the debate about media-politics parallelism in Latin American media systems, and the implications of our analysis of the populism/anti-populism divide for that debate. In the third section, we consider the literature on the mediatization of politics, its applicability to the cases we have described here, the ways in which it may have to be reconceptualized to apply to populist politics and to the political role of media in the global South. In two final sections, we consider two questions about the applicability of our analysis beyond the time and place covered here: first, the question of how to compare the pattern we have described in Latin America with the role of media in representing populism in long-standing democracies of the global North; and second, the implications of the rise of right-wing populism in some of the countries covered in our analysis.

Populist and anti-populist logics

Scholars who have written about anti-populism have sometimes observed that anti-populism is closely parallel to populism in important respects. Our analysis of anti-populism in Latin America strongly confirms those observations. The anti-populist media we have examined here, and the political movements they are aligned with, similar to populist movements, articulate an antagonistic, Manichean view of the political world, sharply divided between opposing camps seen as representing good and evil. Both see their political opposition as illegitimate, as a threat to democracy rather than a normal part of it. Both rely on rhetorics of crisis, and for both, the situation of crisis and the threat represented by their political antagonists justify deviations from what would normally be considered norms of legal procedure, political competition—most dramatically in the case of the Venezuelan coup d'etat—and journalistic professionalism.

Anti-populist media often use specific techniques, discourses and presentational styles common also to populist media and movements. We should remember that the populist leaders discussed here came to power in situations of deep political crisis in which established institutions and elites were largely discredited. In the context of those crises, media often moved in a populist direction themselves, seeking to separate themselves from established elites by revealing wrongdoing, foregrounding the reactions of angry citizens, emphasizing emotion and antagonism, and often adopting more colloquial forms of address and presentation; they began to engage in what Krämer (2014) terms media populism. As noted above, very often the populist leaders who came to power in the "Pink Tide" were supported by mainstream media initially. When these media turned against the populist leaders, they often mobilized similar journalistic forms to support anti-populist mobilization. As Cañizalez (2003, p. 32) writes of Venezuelan anti-populist media, "[t]he media discourse, although critical of Chávez, precisely reproduced him, in the opposite direction." Samet (2019) provides an interesting illustration in his analysis of crime coverage in Venezuela during the presidency of Hugo Chávez. Crime reporting, he argues, centered around the journalism of *denuncias*, which in this context meant testimonials by families of crime victims, highly personalized stories which were used by both pro- and anti-government media to hold their political enemies responsible for insecurity. Discourses of victimization in various forms are central to populist politics in many contexts. Venezuelan popular discourse, Samet argues, was dominated by a populist zeitgeist that encompassed both sides in the political divide. References to "the people," it should be added, are made by both populist and anti-populist media in many ways, though they often use different terms in Spanish. The term "*el pueblo*" is generally associated in Latin America with the political left and national-popular currents. Those on the right often use different terms, "*la gente*", "*los Argentinos de bien*," for example, or "*brasileros de bem*." The similarity in discursive techniques and styles suggests an important corrective to Ostiguy's argument linking the populist/anti-populist divide to the division between "low" and "high" political styles. Anti-populist media in all the countries studied here did, certainly, make use of a discourse that presented populist leaders and their followers as uneducated, uncivilized, out of the loop of Western modernity. This was particularly true in elite newspapers. In other cases, however, anti-populist media rely on plebeian, sensationalistic styles that can be described as populist in the broad sense of the word. A good example is La Nación Más (LN+), the cable television news channel created in 2016 by the company that publishes the traditional conservative paper *La Nación*. After a first phase in which the network attempted a highbrow journalism in line with the newspaper's style, which proved to be a ratings failure, the company hired a programming executive with a background in tabloid-style television (Schejtman, 2021b), turning to a highly opinionated lowbrow style and commercially successful partisanship, similar in many ways to Fox news (Peck, 2019).

To deepen this analysis of the relation between populism and anti-populism, it is useful to draw on Ernesto Laclau's classic discussion of the logic of populism. Populism, for Laclau, is not a deviant form of politics, but a fundamental variant of it, "the political operation par excellence … the construction of a 'people'" (2007, p. 153). Populism, for Laclau, is pure politics. More specifically, populism, in Laclau's analysis, is an operation carried out by the creation of an "equivalential chain" responding to demands unsatisfied by the existing political regime (p. 73). Laclau contrasts this process of creating equivalence among diverse demands with what he terms the politics of difference, in which demands are met with case-by-case solutions. This form of politics is typically observed in institutional systems where demands are usually satisfied, or in stable political systems where welfare policies are functional, institutions work, and individuals feel confidence in those institutions, as, for instance, in the pluralist political systems encouraging negotiation among institutionalized interests that prevailed in North America and Western Europe in the late 20th century. Also, this method of responding to demands corresponds with the usual representation of societies as systems composed by diverse institutions dedicated to differentiated goals and logics (e.g. political institutions for politics, economic institutions for economic issues, health institutions for health issues, media institutions for information issues, etc). This picture, of course, contrasts with polities without functional institutional systems, and this is essential to understand the rise of

populism, since for an "equivalential" chain to start working, a dysfunctional differential chain seems to be indispensable. In other words, for the politicization process encompassing the "equivalential" chain process to make sense, citizens have to be unsatisfied with the system and its institutions. "The crisis of representation is at the root of any populist outburst" (p. 137), Laclau highlights.

In the context of a crisis of representation of this sort, Laclau argues, populist movements arise through a "cathexis process" in which diverse identities and interests get concentrated into a singular person or idea (for instance, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Rafael Correa or Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador), tracing at the same time a political frontier between the people (represented by its leader) and the enemy (understood as oligarchies, foreign powers, the mainstream press, etc.). To sum up, the populist logic works through three interrelated components: diverse demands/claims are not satisfied, they crystallize into a populist leadership, and a political enemy is articulated, to which responsibility for diverse grievances is attributed; the people's identity is constructed around these elements. To illustrate this process the Argentinian Laclau offers the example of a case in the news in Argentina in the 1970s, about the detention of a girl who goes to a hospital to ask for an abortion but is denied. After leaving the hospital, she takes a stone and breaks a window screaming: "Viva Perón!" (Laclau, 2013, p. 16).

Anti-populism, we would argue, follows an essentially similar logic. Anti-populist coalitions similarly unite people with diverse grievances—traditional oligarchical interests, adverse to leftist populist economic policies, members of the middle class unhappy with changes under populist governments that have eroded their statues (Porto, 2023), former supporters of the populist government unhappy about deteriorating economic conditions or security, environmental or indigenous groups objecting to extractivist policies that often finance populist programs, media owners threatened by new media policies, etc. These coalitions often combine opponents of populist governments from both left and right.

Here, it is worth addressing an issue that sometimes came up in our discussions with experts in the various countries, about whether anti-populism was the real motivation for media opposition to populist governments. Our argument here is not that opposition to populism *per se* explains the alignment of media or other actors against populist governments. To some extent, this opposition may in fact be motivated by disgust at the plebeian style of populist leaders or opposition to the anti-institutional politics that often characterizes populist politics. Often it is motivated by much more material or ideological grievances, such as defense of the neoliberal economic order challenged by the Pink Tide movement and opposition to the expansion of the role of the state in the economy, opposition to redistributive policies or changes in power relations among ethnic groups; clashes between developmentalist goals and environmentalism or indigenous autonomy; or threats to the prerogatives of traditional media. As with populism, however, anti-populism needs to create an equivalential chain to link these diverse grievances. This happens through a process of cathexis similar to the process Laclau describes for populism, but negative in character, in which the populist leader serves as an "empty signifier" around which diverse groups with diverse grievances are organized. For anti-populism, however, the leader and the antagonist—the enemy of the people—are the *same signifier*, and the people is constituted around *opposition* to the populist leader. Anti-populism, like populism, is thus based around an antagonistic view of politics, tending to reject the compromise and search for consensus characteristic of traditional institutional politics. It is also, as many theorists of populism have observed, a "thin ideology," as it must unite very diverse social interests. And it is highly personalistic, as it is organized around the negative unifying figure of the populist leader. This is evident in the media discourses we have examined, which identifies the antagonist, responsible for a wide range of social ills, as *chavismo, kirchnerismo, correismo, lulopetismo*, even when these leaders are no longer in power. One implication of this personalization is that anti-populist discourses do not necessarily foreground populism *per se* as the antagonist. Populism is probably too abstract to serve as an empty signifier around which a political movement can be built; for this the negative symbol of the populist *leader* is essential.

Political parallelism, political cleavages, and the role of anti-populist media

Political parallelism has to do with the extent to which the media system parallels the main divisions that structure the arena of political conflict and competition, and the degree to which political and media cultures and practices are differentiated or on the contrary merged (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). We have argued in developing our case studies that a strong political/media parallelism developed in these countries around the populist/anti-populist division, with most media clearly aligned with one camp or another, and the culture and practice of journalism increasingly affected by the logic of politics. We have further argued that anti-populist media played a central role in promoting political mobilization around this division, contributing to the formation of anti-populist parties and coalitions which compete with populist movements for power. And we have argued that these alignments have a significant degree of stability, often persisting over several election cycles even in the aftermath of populist tenure or as (populist) political elites attempt to moderate, tone down populist discourse or retreat from polarizing strategies (see Peruzzotti & Waisbord, 2021; Stavrakakis & Katsembekis, 2019). In this section we explore more deeply the nature of the populist/anti-populist divide in Latin America, and relate our analysis of these cases to debates over the applicability of the concept of political parallelism to Latin America, as well as to the literature in comparative politics on cleavages, which has not often been put in dialogue with the media studies literature on political parallelism.

The concept of political parallelism was introduced in comparative analysis in the context of the analysis of Western media systems, and was one of four key domains which Hallin and Mancini (2004) used to compare media systems in Western democracies. The expansion of comparative media systems later sparked a debate on the concept's applicability beyond the West (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Some scholars have objected to the use of the concept outside its original context. In the case of Latin America, in particular, scholars such as Albuquerque (2013, 2018), have argued that Latin American political systems are thought to lack both competitive political contestation with cleavages clear enough to allow media to reproduce them, and institutionalized relationships between media and political agents sufficiently stable to identify recurrent interaction patterns that would

justify the use of the term political parallelism. Other scholars have argued that Latin American media systems are indeed characterized by political parallelism. Hallin and Echeverría (2025) review this literature and argue that political parallelism is overall strong in Latin America, but different from that of Western Europe. It exhibits significant internal variation in degrees and forms over time and across countries, paralleling different patterns of division, often around personal leaderships, not always ideological, fluid, sometimes concealed behind apparent objectivity, fluctuating in diversity and pluralism, and mostly tied to elite, rather than mass politics. The rise of populist leaders, we argue, unleashing media realignments around the polarized division between support and opposition to the populist movement, represents a particular pattern in political parallelism in the region. In contrast to more ephemeral, perhaps instrumentally-driven alignments, the populism/anti-populism divide touches upon historically recurrent, longer-lasting political frontiers and political identities. We would like to deepen this argument here in two ways: first, by considering more fully the historical roots of the populism/anti-populism divide in the region, and second, by engaging with the comparative literature on political cleavages.

Latin American history, from at least the mid-twentieth century through recent times, is characterized by the constitution of a number of successful populist parties and/or movements, sometimes surviving their founding leaders, that structured positive and negative political identities over longer periods. The recurring politicization/mobilization of populist and anti-populist identities does not take place in a vacuum. They draw on regionally deep-seated sociocultural distances and markers, including threat perceptions vis-à-vis the plebeian world woven into cultural narratives that resonate with elite self-perceptions as westernized minorities endowed with a civilizing mission (Albuquerque, 2019; Ostiguy, 2017; Semán, 2021; Svampa, 1994) that have a strong, recurring role in anti-populist mobilization.

Can we understand the populist/anti-populist distinction as a "political cleavage" in the sense that the term has been used in comparative politics? The concept of cleavage, like that of political parallelism, has been contested. Since Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) seminal research on the divisions that shaped Western European party systems, analysts have seen cleavages as lasting divisions that organize political conflict. But beyond that common core, interpretations have diverged (Torcal & Mainwaring, 2003). One key debate has been between those that focus on sociological determinants and those that have emphasized political agency (Deegan-Krause, 2006). In Western European scholarship, approaches maintaining that political orientations reflect objective social positions were increasingly challenged by research that substantiated the autonomy of political (party) elites in the articulation of transforming social divides into stable cleavages. Inspired by a classical study by Przeworski and Sprague (1986) which argues that in Western Europe class emerged as a cleavage to the extent that left parties emphasized class issues, Torcal and Mainwaring (2003) see a third approach that pays attention to the ways in which political factors and elites "shape cleavages and party systems from above." They further argue Latin America is fertile ground to refine cleavage theory by challenging mechanistic sociological interpretations. The region's different political development brings forward the extent to which political elites, at least during certain critical junctures, play a central role in crafting cleavages. Political agency is manifested in emphasizing or diminishing themes of social, cultural or political division.

The literature on political cleavages has included debates over the need to de-provincialize the concept in order to analyze the formation of cleavages beyond Western Europe. Deegan-Krause (2006), for example, points to an "irreducible degree of diversity in the world's cleavage patterns," in which "nothing is naturally connected" and thick descriptions are necessary to analyze complex patterns. Accounts should aim to reconstruct processes of politicization of socio-cultural (high-low), ethnic, class, national or whatever other possible dividing lines. Within specific legacies or constraints, "political actors … alter which social conflicts have partisan relevance and even create important fault lines" (Torcal & Mainwaring, 2003, p. 59). Their case study illustrates how politics has been a driving force in the crafting of post-authoritarian Chile's cleavage structure, shaped by emphasizing the authoritarian/democratic divide during the decisive transition years, while deemphasizing other social themes.

Our contention is that the recurrent populism/anti-populism divide constitutes a cleavage: not only does it have enduring salience, but it satisfies Bartolini and Mair's criterion that cleavages should be manifest in a social-structural base, a normative element providing identities and roles, and an organizational/political articulation (1990, p. 215). The populism/anti-populism divides in Latin America touch upon class, ethnic and socio-cultural divisions (Deegan-Krause, 2006; Faguet, 2019; Handlin, 2013; Ostiguy, 2017). In Argentina, for instance, *kirchnerismo/peronismo* identities are more prevalent among lower classes, while *antikirchnerismo* is associated with higher incomes (Meléndez, 2022, p. 75). On the normative level, we have also shown how populist and anti-populist narratives contain contending interpretations of society, of its problems, causes and remedies and values. As for the political dimension, populist/anti-populist divides account importantly for attitudes and voting preferences in the region (Meléndez, 2022), though, at an organizational level the cleavage is expressed unevenly in the formation of anti-populist parties. Only in Argentina was a relatively stable, competitive anti-populist competitive coalition set up. However, the party system does not exhaust the political articulation of these cleavages.

Recent research on political identities in Latin America shows that *anti*-partisanships (identities and/or predispositions *against* a specific party or movement), have become protagonists of current regional politics, and this related to the formation of a strong and stable populist/anti-populist cleavage, even when strong party organization is absent. Anti-partisanships are autonomously sustained constructions and constitute long-standing attachments glued by ideological tenets and social distances, by rational considerations and affective connections. Negative partisanships are more widespread than positive ones, and predate and exceed organized political parties. Though not sufficient, they seem to be a necessary condition for party building (Meléndez, 2022, pp. 60–4). While such negative identities are manifest in surveys, the ballot or the street, they do not necessarily find stable expression in the political party arena. The organizational dimension of Bartolini and Mair's (1990) definition of cleavage/identity behaves differently where political parties never encompassed the full spectrum of competition for government power (Dix, 1989).

Stavrakakis and Katsembekis (2019) examine the populism/anti-populism divide in Greek politics, a case, as noted above, that resembles our cases in Latin America in important ways. They maintain that the divide's salience in public discourse throughout Greece's democratic history, its key role in signifying antagonisms and political stakes, its attitudinal and media manifestations, all suggest the presence of a real cleavage. In this discursive-performative understanding of cleavages, the authors identify both media and political elites as the "main anti-populist actors." This is closely parallel to the process we have identified in Latin America, where the political agency involved in the formation of political cleavages involves a central role of the media. The populism/anti-populism cleavage is crafted from above, by the supply side of politics. But as it occurs in the context of crises that imply the collapse of established parties, the crafting process contains an asymmetry. While the populist camp is shaped by an emerging political party/movement leadership, the anti-populist side, made up of elites connected with the delegitimated political order, undergoes an initial phase of political orphanhood, creating a vacuum in which the media are pulled towards politicization. In general, the level of volatility of very unrooted party systems probably increases the importance of the media as the most effective mobilizing machine in the absence of well-organized and stable political organizations. And as Van Dyck (2019) notes in his comparison of Thailand and the Andean countries, populism normally emerges in situations where established parties are strongly discredited, with the consequence that the formation of political parties is (at least initially) complicated for anti-populists. Especially in contexts of leftist populisms, established media offer much friendlier venues to push anti-populists' political agendas (Van Dyck, 2019).

The changing roles and autonomy of media in the production and reproduction of cleavages has not had much discussion in scholarly debates. Hallin and Mancini (2004) argued that the changes in news media of the last decades of the 20th century, particularly their differentiation from the political field, while dependent on the process of secularization, might have independently contributed to the erosion of cleavages. A similar assumption about media logic as a de-aligning or secularizing force in contemporary politics underlies Waldahl and Aardal (2004) observation that the persistence of cleavages in Norway is puzzling, given the media-driven environment. Two decades later, and widening the lens beyond Western Europe, it seems reasonable to ask whether the media in some contexts revert to exerting re-aligning force, strengthening rather than undermining political cleavages. Latin America's different patterns of media politicization and relative autonomy vis-à-vis party politics and their role in the mobilization of anti-populism, offers an opportunity to theorize on the varying autonomy and roles of media in the crafting of cleavage.

While party systems in Latin America are historically volatile, there are important historical continuities that underly the articulation of the populist/anti-populist cleavage, and we want to point to those in closing this section. An important reason for the ubiquity of negative political identities based on the rejection of populism in Latin America might lie in its political history quite different from Western Europe, where the class cleavage, among other divisions (such as rural and urban divisions or religion), played a critical role in the creation of stable party systems, distinct political cultures and a well-known type of political parallelism. The development of mass politics in Latin America took place in a different way than in Western Europe. Dependent and belated capitalist development hindered the formation of working-class parties and then the kind of mass parties that emerged in response to them in Europe on the political right. In contexts of weaker modern urban working-class movements and social heterogeneity, political incorporation of popular sectors tended to depend on mobilization from above by personalistic leaderships articulating and uniting their grievances against the status quo (Collier and Collier, 1991).

The 20th century "national popular" experiences are matched by corresponding anti-populist political stances and traditions (Knight, 1998). Present day anti-populisms in Latin America resonate strongly with long-standing post-colonial politico-cultural frames such as the *civilización-barbarie* dichotomy. According to Semán (2021), Argentina's anti-populism constitutes a coherent political vision with a long history that predates the concrete populist threat of Peronism. That vision is founded in the elite's fears towards plebeian politics in the transition to modernity. Behind their concrete historical incarnations, there are persisting motives underlying anti-populism that center around an idea of the irrationality of the masses and the instrumental demagogy of the leader giving rise to spurious forms of politicization. As in Argentina, many Latin American countries experienced the path to political modernity through eminently populist experiences. Fears of popular enfranchisement have been expressed in exclusionary and delegitimizing visions that depicted mob-like, politically immature or (often racialized) barbaric masses manipulated by demagogues with totalitarian tendencies.[13] In all of them, opponents of populist movements have framed those movements as authoritarian pathologies based on the manipulation of irrational impulses of the poor and/or on self-reproducing corrupted and clientelist machines, and built a counter-identity based on opposition to this image of political pathology. The power of the populist/anti-populist divide to structure political alignments, even in the absence of strongly insitutionalized parties, is rooted in this resonance with a long-standing ideological division in Latin American political culture.

Mediatization, populism, and anti-populism in Latin America

We have argued that anti-populist media played a central role in the formation of political identities and cleavages in the seven countries covered here. This raises interesting questions about how to interpret the media-politics relationships in the context we have analyzed from the point of view of the literature on the mediatization of politics. According to the mediatization of politics thesis, a media logic increasingly comes to transform and even to displace the traditional logic of politics (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). This reading of the interaction between politics and media can be seen in the classic work by Altheide and Snow (1979), which was inspired by Marshall McLuhan's ideas and was further elaborated in Manin's *Principles of the Representative Government* (1997) and his concept of "audience democracy," which argues that classic formulas of representation and mediation (through political parties, for instance) are replaced by communicative skills and media experts' advice to political leaders, situating media logics at

[13] The term "populism" entered anti-populist discourses in a later phase.

the center of politics. These ideas were developed in the Western European context, and were related initially to the displacement of party newspapers by "catch-all" commercial newspapers with audiences that cut across party lines; the rise of television, also a catch-all medium, and its subsequent commercialization; and the shift toward "critical professionalism" in journalism, which was less deferential to political leaderships than earlier journalistic cultures. In the last decades, of course, the new wave of networked media created a further phase in the process of mediatization. Central to the argument about mediatization in general is the idea that, as Hjarvard (2008, p. 105) puts it, media in this period "emerge as an independent institution with a logic of its own that other social institutions have to accommodate to." The literature includes different assumptions about the nature of "media logic," some associating it narrowly with the commercial logic of chasing audience attention, some emphasizing the logic of journalistic professionalism, and some combining them. Either way, a central premise of the traditional literature on mediatization is the idea that media are autonomous and differentiated from political institutions. "Without highly autonomous media institutions," Strömbäck and Esser (2014, p. 13) wrote in one classic work, "there would be no mediatization of politics." The validity of this assumption, however, begins to become unclear when we shift to the analysis of the politics of populism versus anti-populism, and also when we shift to the Latin American context.

If we think first about populism, we could certainly make a case that the rise of populist leaders, in Latin America as in other contexts, is consistent with the mediatization of politics thesis. Populist leaders come to power in situations where the party system has collapsed, and are very often outsiders without strong organizational support, at least initially—though this does vary among the cases we are studying. They therefore depend heavily on media to reach the mass public. Their rise is often facilitated by strong support from mainstream and alternative media, as with Hugo Chávez (Cañizález, 2018) and Rafael Correa (De la Torre & Conhagan, 2009). They also engage in what can be called self-mediatization, making heavy use of media technologies to reach the public, as with Chavez', Correa's, and AMLO's television programs, or Correa's heavy use of social media (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). AMLO interacted substantially more with journalists than previous Mexican presidents had ever done, even if these interactions were often hostile (Santillana & Davis, 2023). And they are typically charismatic personal leaders skilled at grabbing audience attention in a mediated environment and at creating public narratives, masters in that sense of media logic.

On the other hand, these populist leaders are first and foremost political actors, and it could be said that in important ways populism *reversed* the shift toward mediatization, restoring politics to the center of the communication process. Populist leaders, as political actors, compete with journalists suppliers of information and commentary to the mass public; they move to limit the autonomy and power of media and to introduce competing media with political ties and commitments; and in general, as we have seen, in the context of their challenge to established elites highly salient political cleavages emerge and have profound effects on the media system. Laclau makes the point that populism reawakens politics, that it repoliticizes things that had been depoliticized, that, for example, had become matters of technocratic administration or inter-elite bargaining not subject to open public contestation. And indeed, in the countries we have examined here, the rise of populism was connected with a clear "politicization of the media" (Cerbino et al., 2014).

If we turn to anti-populist media, we could say, again, that in some sense their central role fits the mediatization of politics thesis. As we have seen, party systems collapse in the political contexts we are talking about here, and traditional elites associated with the old parties, most of the time socially unrooted and with weak organizational structures, find it very difficult to mount effective challenges to populist regimes through the normal political mechanisms. Anti-populist media fill the vacuum, taking the lead in creating political narratives and mobilizing political opposition. We have made the argument here that their role is in an important way autonomous, both in the sense that they are breaking with traditional transactional relationships with the state, and in the sense that there is no strong political opposition whose lead they can follow. However, in playing this role, media are clearly political actors, acting according to a political logic, mobilizing the formation of an electoral coalition and articulating a distinct conception, as Laclau puts it, of "the people" and its enemies. As we have seen, their political role tends to undermine traditional journalistic norms and professional solidarities, and the high degree of polarization affects commercial logics of media production as well, as audience partisanship comes to constrain journalists" choices.

Wolfsfeld, Sheafer and Althaus (2022, p. 25)—in a work that says relatively little about populism—express perplexity about how to analyze Donald Trump's relations with the media, and especially his use of Twitter, noting the impossibility of "drawing sharp lines around which actions were political and which communicative." Wolfsfeld, Shaefer and Althaus' Politics-Media-Politics model is distinct from mediatization theory in that they argue that politics continues to have the central determinative role, even if media have an independent role with significant effects on politics; they consider mediatization to be one part of a larger dynamic process, more important in some cases then others. They share with mediatization theory, however, the assumption that political and media "ecosystems" are separate and distinct. But anti-populist media in the Latin American cases we have analyzed here, as Hallin (2021) argues about populist media like Fox News, are very much hybrid actors, for which political logics and logics of commercial/journalistic production of narratives for mass audiences are fundamentally intertwined. In cases like this media seems to replace traditional political actors –as Manin and the classic theorists of mediatization of politics observed– but by playing a political role, mixing media logics (commercialization, journalism, media technology) with political logics (supporting policies, a specific vision of politics and the composition of the national polity, for instance). Anti-populist media may act autonomously, but not following a "media logic" that can be seen as differentiated from political logic.

As Echeverría (2023) observes, mediatization of politics is not a universal and unitary process, but depends on specific political and historical contexts. The forms it takes in Latin America differ from the standard interpretation based on the Western European model, above all because media in Latin America lack the relative autonomy and professional differentiation from the political world that characterized the

European and U.S. history in the last half of the 20th century; Voltmer and Sorensen (2019) make this point about "transitional" societies in general. The rise of populist movements—and of anti-populist reactions to them—and the crises of representation in which they rise to prominence, also create a context in which mediatization takes forms very different from the form of late twentieth century Western Europe. It created a complex type of "political mediatization" different from the more stable and differentiated media systems from the era of uncontested rationalization, differentiation, and "disenchantment" (to use the Weberian term), which corresponded with the politics of bargaining among well-institutionalized parties and interest groups in the consensual context of post-World War II Europe or the United States. If we apply Wolfsfeld, Sheafer and Althaus' Politics-Media-Politics approach, we could say that the political crises of the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, as the neoliberal consensus of the late twentieth-century broke down, produced a political polarization that transformed both the political and the media ecosystems. It undercut both the transactional, clientelist relations that historically tied media to governing political elites, and nascent forms of professionalization and differentiation of media institutions that existed in some countries—Argentina, for example, more than Ecuador. The collapse of the existing party systems produced an environment in which political loyalties were up for grabs in a situation of high political stakes, and producing public narratives through media of all kinds was extremely central. In this context anti-populist media played a key and in important ways autonomous role, in reshaping the political system, creating a new political cleavage around the populist anti-populist split, and doing so in the absence of leadership from political parties. So, consistent with the P-M-P model, a political crisis led to changes in the relation of media to political actors, and in this context media had important effects back on the political ecosystem. The PMP, model, however, like standard mediatization theory, assumes that communicative and political actions are still separable (Wolfsfeld et al.,2022, p. 25). The sequence Politics-Media-Politics therefore means that once politics triggers media change, it is some purely media logics, incentives or constraints that shape a media output that, subsequently affects the political process (p. 6). In the kind of politicized mediatization we have described here, however, media are central actors in politics but follow a hybrid logic in which political, journalistic and commercial goals are merged.

Media anti-populism: Comparing Latin America with Western Europe and the United States

Populist leaders typically violate and challenge institutional norms. Established media institutions generally see it as their role to uphold central institutional norms, and function to "defend a certain model of democracy (one made up of a combination of pluralism, minority rights, moderation and good policy)" "against actors and acts that fall outside that model" (Goyvaerts & de Cleen, 2020, p. 95). For this reason, even if, as many scholars have noted, journalistic routines may favor populist actors in certain ways, established media very often play a watchdog role in relation to populist parties and leaders, and coverage of such actors is often quite negative (Carlson, Robinson & Lewis, 2021; de Jong, 2019; Goyvaerts & de Cleen, 2020; Novais, 2022; Wettstein, et al., 2018). It is worth asking, therefore, how the pattern of media anti-populism we have described here compares with the watchdog role of media as it has been described in the West European and North American literature on media and populism.

Comparatively, we argue, Latin America's anti-populism is a politically thicker phenomenon with deeper effects both on journalism and on the party system. And the role of media in Latin-American anti-populism is much more central. Anti-populist discourse is generally understood in the literature on Western Europe as a defensive device deployed by established political, academic and media actors. "Populism" as a signifier is frequently used as a marker of irresponsible, demagogic and irrational politicization attempts that trespass proper institutional norms deemed compatible with liberal democracy. Despite the fact that many European observers recognize that anti-populist discourse resembles populism in that it institutes moralizing and Manichean antagonism[14], therefore approaching more of a political logic, media anti-populism in Western Europe and North America remains primarily a defensive reaction intended to maintain existing and consolidated institutional structures, while Latin American anti-populism has been a central mobilizer of new political identities and movements in a context of much weaker institutional settings. Latin American anti-populism is also, as we argue above, much more deeply rooted in fundamental political identities, given the centrality of populism to the development of mass politics in Latin America.

If we focus first on journalism, West European and North American reactions to the rise of populism do not involve the kind of radical restructuring and politicization of journalism we have described in Latin America. Novais (2022), for example, describes strong continuity in the professional norms of the news magazine *Visão*, even as it took a highly critical stance toward an emerging populist party in Portugal. In the United States, the rise to power of Donald Trump strained the routines of journalism and produced some important shifts, particularly in the direction of more aggressive fact-checking, including the use in certain contexts of the term "lie," previously considered overly opinionated. It also provoked considerable tension within the profession over the norms of neutrality and "objectivity"; but top journalists and news executives generally pushed back strongly against a shift toward a more activist conception of journalism (Carlson et al., 2021, pp. 163–166). After Trump was out of office, media shifted their watchdog orientation substantially toward the Biden administration, in contrast with the selective watchdog orientation found in anti-populist media in Latin America. At CNN, which was widely seen as having moved more strongly than other mainstream media toward a distinct anti-Trump political identity, executives announced an effort to move the organization back toward political dealignment. Panievsky (2022), in a study of the response of Israeli journalists to right-wing populist rule, similarly found that journalists responded to populist accusations of bias by doubling down on their commitment to non-partisanship, stressing a strategic perspective that avoided political judgements and incorporating right-wing views to refute charges of bias. Nothing like the "war journalism," source endogamy or stable political alignments we have seen in the Argentine

[14] Miró (2019) discusses anti-populist fearmongering and confrontational discourse as a political resource to influence or mobilize voters. The Greek case, the only one in Western Europe involving a left-wing party in power, and involving a country with weaker institutionalization of journalistic professionalism, may have more similarity to Latin American cases.

or Ecuadorean cases can be seen in mainstream media in the United States; the big transformation in journalistic culture there has taken place primarily in populist media, not in the legacy media where critical coverage of populism can be found.

These differences in the media's role are related to underlying differences in the nature of the media systems and of journalism culture. Latin America's populisms, both those of the post-neoliberal wave and those of the classic first wave, have antagonized the socio-economic elites (the "oligarchies") and their foreign allies. These antagonized sectors that historically enjoyed privileged access (either through direct ownership or through shared social worlds) to the private commercial media that constitute the bulk the mainstream media in a region historically lacking public service or alternative media logics or deeply rooted professional cultures. This alignment pattern differs from those that prevail in the more diverse and professionalized media systems in long-standing Western democracies.

The differences we observe between media anti-populism in Latin America and Europe/North America are also related to differences in the relative strength of party politics and party systems, and of institutional structures of "horizontal accountability" more generally. While in Western Europe and North America populist forces have emerged (usually on the right, rather than the left) in a context where significant erosion of established parties has taken place, established parties nevertheless maintain considerable strength. In Western European parliamentary systems, even where populist parties have entered government, they have done so as part of coalition governments—as opposed to the presidential systems of Latin America—that preserve both institutionalized opposition and limits on their power. In the United States, Republicans lost control of Congress two years after Trump was elected, and the Democrats in Congress were able to launch hearings uncovering critical information about the populist leader. Factors such as federalism in the United States, parliamentary rule in Western Europe, the role of the European Union, and strong judicial institutions and autonomous civil service bureaucracies limit the ability of a populist leader to control information or to monopolize political discourse. In this context, as Novais (2022) puts it, "the reporter is not the primary definer of the news on populism," and there is no need for media to take on a primary role in organizing political opposition.

In contrast, the rise of Latin America's Pink Tide populisms occurred in the context of a much more dramatic collapse of traditional parties. Established party elites were widely discredited, and established parties were unable to compete in the electoral arena, at least in the initial phases of populist rule. Other mechanisms of horizontal accountability were often weak to begin with. The discrediting of established party elites reduced the range of authoritative voices on which media professionals could rely as sources, and regional media owners and editors have repeatedly expressed, in private and sometimes publicly, that they felt morally obliged and politically compelled to take up oppositional roles they perceived as vacant (see Becerra & Lacunza, 2012).

The rise of right-wing populists: Crisis or continuity of the populist/anti-populist cleavage

We have argued here that anti-populist media played key roles in creating a new political cleavage which remained stable over a fairly long period following the rise—and fall—of left-wing populist governments. In two of the countries covered here, right-wing populists eventually came to power—Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Javier Milei in Argentina. This raises two questions which we address in this final section: first, what was the relation between anti-populism and the rise of right-wing populism; and second, what will happen with the patterns of media/politics parallelism organized around the populist/anti-populist cleavage?

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, a retired army officer and long-time congressional backbencher, successfully staged a radical-right populist outsider-insurgent path to Brazil's presidency in 2018, echoing Donald Trump. His campaign made use of online affordances (especially Facebook and WhatsApp), moved to form a new digital right-wing media ecosystem, and mobilized a series cultural, economic racial and social threat perceptions, grievances and demands. These resentments found a common vessel in *antipetismo*, which, as we have seen, was strongly present in mainstream media discourse in Brazil, particularly through the synergy of media with the Car Wash anti-corruption investigation against Lula, whose leading judge would later become Bolsonaro's Minister of Justice and Public Security (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020). Araújo and Prior (2021), in an analysis of Brazil's prestige newspaper editorials, argue that during the 2018 campaign, Brazilian media hoped to "normalize" Bolsonaro, in contrast to the international press that framed him as a right wing populist leader from the outset. That normalization strategy, the authors argue, was consistent with long-standing editorial positions and political defense of neoliberal policies and the decades long opposition towards the PT and the political class in general, which facilitated Bolsonaro's framing as an anti-system candidate. Notwithstanding, in the Brazilian case, mainstream media came into conflict with Bolsonaro fairly early, and Bolsonaro, like other populist leaders, escalated his critique of the media by railing against "the usual media" as a part of "the system" vainly attempting to bring him down (Marques, 2023). Only the television network Record, owned by an evangelical church, moved clearly into Bolsonaro's camp once he was in office. Other broadcasters turned pro-government initially due to official advertising, but then de-aligned. Otherwise, mainstream media coverage of Bolsonaro could be said to resemble the pro-institutional "watchdog" role we have described in Western European media, more than the war journalism of Latin American anti-populism in the context of Left-wing populist rule; as we have seen, Gagliardi et al. (2022) show that newspaper editorials continued to focus on the PT as a threat even as they criticized Bolsonaro. Eventually, of course, Bolsonaro lost his bid for reelection and Lula returned to power, leaving the political landscape somewhat complicated, with two lines of division, pro-and anti-Bolsonaro and pro- and anti-Lula, coexisting.

In the 2023 elections in Argentina, Javier Milei, a libertarian economist and political outsider forged in popular talk show television obtained 56% of votes in a runoff election against Sergio Massa, the Peronist moderate candidate. Milei ran very much as a populist, wielding a chain saw and denouncing "*la casta*," the political class, from which he only excluded the leadership of the hardline faction of the old anti-kirchnerist coalition. That anti-kirchnerist coalition, Juntos por el Cambio, came in third in the first round of voting, and most of its 24% of the votes went to Milei in the

second round; its candidate, Patricia Bullrich, later entered Milei's cabinet as Minister of Public Security. Prolonged poor economic performance across the last three governments, alternating between the populist and the anti-populist coalitions, plus a post-pandemic context in which the memories of the hard lockdown easily resonated with libertarian discourses framing the state as the enemy, provided a context favorable to the rise of right-wing populism. Beyond that, however, we would argue that the populist/anti-populist cleavage and the media alignments and discourses connected with it provided fertile ground for the rise of a populist like Milei. Anti-populism, as we have argued, is similar to populism in its antagonistic view of the political world and consequent high degree of negative partisanship, as well as its discourse of crisis, with the implication that extraordinary measures are necessary to combat the enemies of "*los argentinos de bien*." Anti-populism thus provided a discursive context in which a right-wing candidate who might have appeared too extreme in a different era could be embraced. Throughout the term of Alberto Fernández, the Peronist president—more moderate than Cristina Kirchner, who served as his Vice-President—the anti-populist coalition had shifted significantly to the right and thereby contributed to the normalization of further radicalized positions and tone. Ramírez and Vommaro (2024) suggest that the affective and ideological polarization in politics and in the "partisanized media" was a central driver of voting in 2023.

The anti-populist political coalition and anti-populist media generally shifted toward Milei following the defeat of their own candidate in the first round of voting. Milei profited from that dynamics of the asymmetrical political parallelism described in our analysis of the Argentine case, as the Peronists had little support in the media, and the anti-kirchnerist media moved to "normalize" Milei for their electorate. "Macri, Bullrich and the anti-Peronist media ecosystem," Ramírez and Vommaro (2024, p. 170) argue, "consecrated Milei as a candidate not only palatable but necessary to defeat 'populism.' The 'new' representation of competition provided by such opinion leaders provided the necessary narrative and emotional element to consolidate a current of negative partisanship against the official candidate." Other observers argue that, as post electoral surveys showed anti-populist voters were already inclined to back the outsider, the anti-populist political and media elites followed suit and endorsed Milei (Abal Medina, 2023). In that interpretation, normalization among their constituents and publics had already occurred. Libertarian right-wing populism, in sum, is not a direct product of the anti-populist camp, but the latter prepared the terrain in discourse first, to become an essential electoral coalition partner later.

What will happen in the long run to the populist/anti-populist cleavage and the pattern media/politics parallelism that emerged during the Kirchner governments? In the initial year following Milei's inauguration, anti-populist mainstream media newsrooms were divided in their reactions to the new government. LN+ remained, at least within its prime time news shows, unambiguously pro-government. Some professionals working for the channel entered the government's communications team. Journalists in *La Nación* and *Clarín*'s outlets seemed to polarize around Milei. Many hardline anti-*kirchneristas* have defended Milei as a hope against populist decadence, while to other more republican anti-populists Milei constitutes an equivalent populist threat to liberal democracy and press freedom. This split in the anti-populist media in some sense follow's Ostiguy's distinction between "high" and "low" political styles, and illustrates the way they were combined in the anti-populist movement. Milei's regular volcanic outbursts against journalists and his populist framing of the news media as part of a state-dependent establishment have set alarm bells ringing among the journalistic and press editors associations that had been close to the anti-populist media during the media war.[15]

On the other hand, to the time of writing, Milei enjoys support of the core Juntos por el Cambio voters, and the president rants, building on the anti-populist discourses of the previous years, against "kirchnerism" and "populism," linking the term "populism" to the economic rather than political meaning, as *statism*. Although Milei adopted anti-kirchnerist rhetoric and tropes, they do not exhaust his articulation of political antagonism, and he applies them widely and somewhat differently than traditional anti-populism, sometimes charging anti-populist critics of his own policies with "kirchnerism." At the time of this writing it is not clear what will happen with the populist/anti-populist cleavage that structured Argentinian politics and media over the previous two decades. Milei's government could fail, and Argentina could shift back to that alignment. It could move toward a split between right and left-wing populism, perhaps with the Peronists as the more "institutional" voice. It could move toward a period of more fluid, ad-hoc political alignments, which is common in Latin America.

Conclusion

In this monograph we have explored the political role of anti-populist media in the formation of a populist/anti-populist political cleavage in seven Latin American countries in which left-wing governments came to power in the first decades of the twenty-first century. By focusing on anti-populism and anti-populist media, we shed light on a missing actor in the existing literature on media and populism and underscore the importance of theorizing anti-populist media as crucial to understanding media/politics dynamics in contexts of populist mobilization. Our empirical approach considers the political alignment of media during and following periods of populist rule; the nature of anti-populist political discourses and their manifestation in the media; transformations in the profession of journalism, as manifested factors such as newsroom composition, reporting practices and professional identity and organization; and, finally, transformation in party alignments and the cleavage structure of politics, and the ways in which media may be involved in those political transformations. The conceptualization of these phenomena requires a shift away from the dominant framing of media-populism relationships in terms of press freedom. Instead, we foreground the concept of political parallelism and consider both the ways in which the conflict between populist governments and opposition media transform journalism culture and practices and the role of anti-populist media in shaping alignments in the world of politics.

In developing our in-depth studies of Argentina and Ecuador we have argued that a strong political/media parallelism developed in these countries around the populist/anti-

[15] 'Entidades periodísticas critican a Javier Milei por restricciones oficiales a la libertad de prensa,' *Clarín* 3/5/2024. [https://www.clarin.com/politica/entidades-periodisticas-critican-javier-milei-restricciones-oficiales-libertad-prensa_0_zHK4pkaPJj.html].

populist division, with most media clearly aligned with one camp or another, and the culture and practice of journalism increasingly affected by the logic of politics. We have further argued that anti-populist media played a central role in promoting political mobilization around this division, contributing to the formation of anti-populist parties and coalitions which compete with populist movements for power. These alignments, as we have seen, have a significant degree of stability, often persisting over several election cycles even in the aftermath of populist tenure or as (populist) political elites attempt to tone down populist discourse or retreat from polarizing strategies.

This pattern, we have argued, can be seen across all seven countries covered in this study, though with important variations. We have identified a number of factors which may account for these variations, including decisions by both political leaders and media elites to continue with or opt out of transactional relationships between the state and the media, the extent to which left-wing leaders adopt policies that threaten the established structure of the media system, and the balance of power between left-wing leaders and the media, which is a product both of the electoral strength of populist leaders and of the market position of media institutions. Some elements of journalistic culture, including levels of journalistic professionalism and traditions of active or passive reporting may also play a role.

While the common pattern of media-politics parallelism certainly responds to endogenous political developments we have highlighted, we also identified important transnational diffusion anti-populist media discourse that has had an important role in the shaping of the phenomenon.

Following the analysis of the case studies, we explore in greater depth some important theoretical foundations and implications of the phenomenon of media anti-populism in Latin America.

Firstly, we draw on the literature on populism to consider the extent to which the logic of anti-populism can be understood to mirror that of populism. In Latin America's frequent political crises, the media often move in a populist direction, seeking to separate themselves from established elites and foregrounding the reactions of angry citizens, emphasizing antagonism, and often adopting more colloquial forms of address and presentation. When these media turn against the populist leaders, they often mobilize similar journalistic forms to support anti-populist mobilization. As with populism, moreover, in order to mobilize politically anti-populism needs to create an "equivalential" chain in which the populist leader serves as an "empty signifier" around which diverse groups with diverse grievances are organized. A demos is constituted around opposition to the populist leader. This was evident in the media discourses we have examined, which identify the antagonist, responsible for a wide range of social ills, as *chavismo, kirchnerismo, correismo, lulopetismo*, even when these leaders are no longer in power. In this sense, there is a deeper logic of political mobilization and antagonism which cuts across populist and anti-populist media and movements. One implication of this is that the common distinction between populism and anti-populism in terms of the employment of "low" and "high" political styles, put forward originally by Ostiguy (2017), needs to be qualified, as anti-populism may also adopt "low" styles of politics. This may be one factor in the emergence of right-wing populism out of the populist/anti-populist cleavage, discussed in our final section.

Secondly, we consider more deeply the implications of our argument for debates about the application of the concept of political parallelism to Latin American media systems. In doing this, we draw on the literatures in comparative politics about the formation of "political cleavages," a connection which is often neglected in works on comparative media systems. That literature, like the literature on political parallelism, includes debate about the varied nature of political cleavages across the global North and South. We also consider the historical roots of the populist/anti-populist divide that developed with the rise of "Pink Tide neopopulism" in the 2000s. We argue that the populism/anti-populism divide in Latin America does fit the concept of a "political cleavage" that organizes political conflict over longer periods. Research in comparative politics has shown that the region's political development is consistent with the argument that political cleavages, rather than flowing "naturally" from socio-economic divisions, are crafted by the "performative" role of political elites. And we argue that, given the constitutive delegitimation of established parties in contexts of populist emergence, media elites play a particularly central and autonomous role in the creation and reproduction of political fault lines.

Here it is useful to consider the relationship of our analysis of the populism/anti-populism cleavage with the analysis of "confrontational" and "corporate/consensus" media regimes in Latin America by Guerrero et al. (2024). Under the heading of political parallelism, these authors characterize the role of media as "partisan" during confrontational regimes, when populist media are in power and a *guerra mediatica* is underway, and as "collaborative" with governing elites during "corporate/consensus" regimes. As we have seen in the countries we have analyzed, media are indeed collaborative with governing elites in the period following a populist regime. But they are also highly partisan, and important elements of their political mobilizing role and the characteristics of journalism culture associated with it carry over following the transition away from a "confrontational regime." We believe this underscores the importance of giving prominent attention to political parallelism in the analysis of Latin American media systems, beyond the concept of "capture" which is central to the analysis of Guerrero et al.

In the third part of our discussion, we focus on the concept of mediatization, and the related theoretical framework of Wolfsfeld et al.'s (2022) Politics-Media-Politics model. Here we consider debates about the applicability of traditional conceptualizations of the mediatization of politics to both populism and anti-populism, and to the context of Latin America and other parts of the global South. We show that, while on one hand the rise of populist leaders looks consistent with classic mediatization thesis given their heavy dependence and on media and their affinities with media logics, in another sense their emergence implies a reversal of mediatization, restoring politics to the center of the communication process. Populists tend to by-pass journalists, limit the autonomy and power of media and introduce competing politically-committed media. Their challenge to established media elites has profound effects on the media system, and populism is connected with a clear politicization of the media.

The role of anti-populist media is similarly two-sided. With the collapse of the political party system tied to traditional elites, anti-populist media fill the vacuum, taking the lead in creating political narratives and mobilizing political opposition. We have argued that their role is in important ways autonomous, both in the sense that they are breaking with traditional transactional relationships with the state, and in the sense that there is no strong political opposition whose lead they can follow. Their role could be said, therefore, to represent a form of mediatization of politics. In playing this role, however, media are clearly political actors, acting according to a political logic, mobilizing the formation of an electoral coalition and articulating a distinct conception, as Laclau puts it, of "the people" and its enemies. As we have showed, their political role tends to undermine traditional journalistic norms and professional solidarities, and the high degree of polarization affects commercial logics of media production, as audience partisanship comes to constrain journalists' choices. In this sense, again, we could say that media anti-populism represents a politicization of media; and if traditional mediatization theory, or the Politics-Media-Politics model, rely on an assumption that political and media logics remain essentially differentiated, then it would seem that these perspectives need to be reconceptualized to apply to the media-politics relation we have described here.

Following these conceptual discussions, we consider the comparison between media coverage of populism in Latin America and in consolidated Western democracies. Media actors in Latin America generally see their own role as parallel to the watchdog role played by media in these countries. We argue, however, that while media in consolidated democracies are often quite critical of populist actors, media anti-populism in these countries is in general very different. The strength of traditional parties and other institutions of "horizontal" and "vertical" accountability mean that media do not play such a central political role, and there is far more continuity in journalistic norms and practices than in Latin America. In short, the differentiation of media and political logics remains much stronger in this context.

In the final section, we consider the rise of right-wing populism, which may arise out of the populist/anti-populist cleavage in these countries, but may also disrupt it going forward.

The analysis presented here is of course tentative, given the fact, as noted at the outset, that research on which this study is based was not designed originally as comparative research, and there is a lot of unevenness in the data we have available even on our two principal cases, let alone on the cases we analyze primarily on the basis of secondary literature and consultations with country experts. There is clearly room for deeper and more systematic research into all of these cases.

One direction research on populism and anti-populism in Latin America could certainly go is toward fuller consideration of current digital transformations and their implications for the political role of media and the formation of political alignments. The timing of many of the cases covered here encompasses the transition between media systems dominated by traditional mainstream media and the current situation where legacy media and digital media (including social media and technological platforms) converge or interact in the creation and delivering of information and political discourses to the public. This factor needs to be considered in further investigations especially to know in more detail how the political parallelism documented here is manifested in digital media, and whether this may alter the mobilizing role of legacy media. The reading of recent studies, most of them based on Western countries, noting social media's role in fostering populism, political polarization and partisanship (Engesser et al., 2016; Törnberg, 2022; Wilson et al., 2020), seems to suggest that digital media might be expected to show a continuity, if not a reinforcement, of established patterns of polarization and emerging political parallelism in Latin America. Additionally, since anti-populism in the region is strongly associated with right wing ideological stances, recent findings of "asymmetrical ideological segmentation" favoring right wing discourses in Facebook (González Bailón et al., 2023) or in X-Twitter (Huszár et al., 2022) might make us think that, at least in Latin America, the current hybrid context of traditional mainstream media and digital media could have intensified populist *and* anti-populist positioning and narratives providing a fertile environment for the populist anti-populist cleavage.

Another important question that may be raised from our study is the comparability of our findings to other parts of the world where populist politics has a prominent role. We have argued that the cases of the United States, Western Europe and Israel are different, and attribute this to the strength of both political institutions and journalistic culture. It should be noted that the case of Greece may be an exception; Greece differs from other Western countries in many ways connected with the fact that Greece is the only European country in which left-wing populism came to power, as it did in Latin America. However, the model of populist anti-populist cleavage we have described here may have more parallels in other parts of the world. Van Dyck (2019) compares cases in South Asia with Latin America finding common patterns that we have highlighted, including a central role of media as a political actor. An expansion of our research to explore more cases throughout the world makes sense to understand better how populism unfolds in different parts of the world and what kind of relationships between media and politics are established in different contexts. It is possible that global findings would confirm the likelihood of an aggressive illiberal anti-populist reaction in the media especially when left wing populism is in power and liberal institutions are relatively weakly rooted.

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