Why US Democracy Trumps Populism: Comparative Lessons Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT Matias López and Juan Luna (2021) challenged my comparative analysis of populism's threat to democracy, its reliance on institutional factors (coupled with conjunctural opportunities), and especially the inference about US democracy's immunity to populist suffocation. However, their emphasis on structuralist and culturalist factors, which would suggest the vulnerability of the United States, is strikingly selective, theoretically unconvincing, and empirically problematic. López and Luna's methodological improvement of my analysis does not alter the substantive findings or overturn my sanguine inference about US democracy's likely resilience. Only their further modifications yield more pessimistic scenarios, but those adjustments stand on shaky theoretical and empirical ground. Indeed, the experiences of 2020–2021 corroborate my theory and its comparative lessons. The US institutional framework held firm and foiled the insistent attempts of President Trump and his most fervent followers to perpetuate the US populist in power. Consequently, US democracy continues to appear quite safe from populist strangulation.

My comprehensive analysis of populist governments in Europe and Latin America showed that the risk to liberal democracy was lower than many observers stirred up by Donald Trump's stunning election had feared (Weyland 2020). I define populism as a political strategy through which personalistic, typically charismatic leaders seek and exercise power through unmediated, quasi-direct appeals and connections to an amorphous, heterogeneous, largely unorganized mass of followers. Based on this definition, I theorized that personalistic plebiscitarian leadership suffocated democracy only when two types of conditions intersected: (1) when institutional weakness created room for maneuvering by personalistic leaders; and (2) when conjunctural opportunities, arising from severe and acute but resolvable crises or from hydrocarbon windfalls, allowed such leaders to obtain overwhelming support.

My wide-ranging analysis substantiated these arguments by examining 30 cases of populist chief executives. It is interesting that they lined up along three paths in which a specific type of institutional weakness coinciding with a specific conjunctural opportunity led to democracy's asphyxiation in only six cases—namely, under Latin America's Bolivarian populism in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador; in Latin America's neoliberal populism in Alberto Fujimori's Peru; and under Europe's ethno-national populism in Hungary and Turkey. My investigations thus found that populism was less dangerous for democracy than many feared; only in relatively few cases did personalistic plebiscitarian leaders manage to concentrate enough power to smother democracy.

This examination yielded the prediction that Trump would not destroy US democracy. After all, a rigid constitution and resilient checks and balances provided institutional strength; and, given the absence of a severe and acute yet resolvable crisis and a hydrocarbon windfall, the US populist would not win overwhelming support. Trump's defeat in 2020 seemed to corroborate these arguments.

Just when I thought that after 30 years in the profession, I finally had correctly predicted an outcome, López and Luna (2021) challenged my findings. They claim that my analysis suffered from various flaws and omitted crucial factors that make US democracy appear more precarious than I suggested. I appreciate these critics' hard work in scrutinizing my analysis and trying to correct and

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improve it, and I share their underlying concern to take populism's threat seriously and avoid complacency.

Moreover, I agree that US democracy faces serious problems arising from various factors, including regional industrial decline, deepening urban–rural divisions, serious racial tensions, intensifying cultural conflict, disproportionate power of money, and new challenges to expertise and rationality. All of these factors have fueled stark polarization, which threatens liberal democracy.

However, not all problems facing US democracy go together. For the specific risk examined in my article—that is, democracy's strangulation by populist chief executives—party polarization arguably limited the danger arising from Trump's power hunger: Democrats rejected him as intensely as Republicans supported him. Consequently, whereas Venezuela's Chávez and Peru's Fujimori achieved 70% to 80% backing and thus gained overwhelming clout to strangle democracy, the US populist never reached 50%—far too little to do similar damage. Therefore, although it is a major problem for US democracy overall, profound polarization actually hemmed in the destructive force of Trump's populism.

Attention to complexity is crucial for understanding the politics of populism. In this spirit, I discuss the major points raised by López and Luna (2021) and scrutinize their counterarguments. This response proceeds largely in the order of their comments.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS AND CULTURAL VALUES

López and Luna (2021) criticize the institutionalist dimensions of my theory and call for the inclusion of cultural and structural factors that—they claim—make the United States significantly more vulnerable to democratic breakdown. Specifically, López and Luna (2021, 424) question my argument that parliamentarism has an inherent institutional weakness in allowing for "easy changeability." However, attenuated checks and balances do facilitate transformations, which can erode democracy. Accordingly, Hungary's Orbán managed to smother democracy in perfectly legal ways (Scheppele 2018, 549–52), an unlikely feat under presidentialism (Brewer-Carías 2010). More broadly, Metcalf (1998, 346) highlighted parliamentarism's vulnerabilities by recording its frequent downfall during the interwar years.

López and Luna (2021, 424) also are concerned that my invocation of the well-documented institutional weaknesses of many presidential systems in Latin America (Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2020) suffers from endogeneity. Aware of this risk (Weyland 2020, 392), I scored institutional weakness for the time before a populist's election (see online appendix of Weyland 2020, p. 3). Moreover, none of the institutional weaknesses that I invoked reflected prior instances of democratic breakdown—especially not the populist suffocation of democracy, my dependent variable. Consequently, there is no endogeneity problem—and no reason to eliminate these institutional weaknesses from the analysis, as do López and Luna (2021, 425).

Furthermore, whereas structural and cultural factors partly shape institutions, as López and Luna argue, institutions also shape those factors; structures are no more "basic" than institutions. Moreover, does López and Luna's own analysis suffer from some endogeneity? For instance, their culturalist argument that traditional values facilitate democracy's suffocation relies in part on data collected long after populist presidents won office. What if right-wing populists reinforced traditional values? Peru, for instance, had its first World Values Survey (WVS) in 1996—but Fujimori had already governed since 1990. Moreover, López and Luna incorrectly coded the Czech Republic, where *non*traditional values have long prevailed; and they assigned a score to Honduras—which, according to the WVS website (2021b), has never conducted a WVS (López and Luna 2021; online appendix, table 2).

The main problem with López and Luna's emphasis on traditional values concerns the United States. They claim (2021, 426, n. 3) to record a country's score "in the wave of the [WVS] most proximate to the emergence of the populist ruler." However, although the last four WVS wave results (i.e., 1999–2019) are publicly accessible (World Values Survey 2021b), the source listed under López and Luna's score sheet (see their online appendix, p. 4) suggests that they consulted only Inglehart and Welzel (2005)—which, based on a 1999 survey, ranked the United States as traditional. In the many years thereafter, however, rapid value change (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 97–99) has lifted the United States above the cutoff point (namely, to 0.1751), as shown in the WVS of April–May 2017 (World Values Survey 2021a). Indeed, a linear interpolation from WVS 6 (2011), when the United States scored -0.3046 (World Values Survey 2021a), suggests that already by Trump's 2016 victory, the United States qualified as *non*traditional. Norris and Inglehart (2019, 338) highlighted the US threshold crossing: "We argue that a tipping point has been reached in the gradual erosion of the socially conservative hegemony of traditional values in America." According to López and Luna's (2021) reasoning, this move to nontraditional values *hinders* the populist strangulation of US democracy. Consequently, López and Luna's culturalist arguments actually may reinforce—rather than challenge—my main prediction.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS—BUT WHICH ONES?

López and Luna (2021) also advocate the inclusion of structural factors. However, given the variety of structural factors that democracy scholars have examined, the obvious question is: Which ones? López and Luna are selective and privilege inequality, in both socioeconomic and ethnic terms. To justify this selectivity, the many Americanist writings that they cite cannot be of much help because those scholars analyze democratic quality, not breakdown and populist suffocation, which have never occurred in the United States. For the comparativist study of regime change, the most important theory has been that of Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), which López and Luna (2021, 422) reference. However, López and Luna do not mention the major controversies surrounding this theory and its questionable empirical support. For instance, Teorell's (2010, 60–61) statistical investigations and Haggard and Kaufman's (2016, 50, 57, 75–76, 221, 234–44, 248–52, 257) thorough study found no impact of socioeconomic inequality on democratic transitions and reversals. Given this lack of evidence, Acemoglu et al. (2013, 16–17) jettisoned their own argument—years before López and Luna invoked it! Similarly, the claim by López and Luna (2021, 422) that the disproportionate clout of elites subverts democratic decision making, especially in the United States, has faced powerful challenges (Elkjær and Iversen 2020).

In addition to not mentioning the serious questions surrounding inequality arguments, López and Luna seem to score the United States inaccurately. They claim to count "all cases with Gini >0.4 as…unequal" (2021, 426, n. 1), and they score the United States as unequal (see their online appendix, table 2). However,

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their own figure 1 (2021, 423) shows the United States below 0.4, as does their source, Standardized World Income Inequality Database, through 2020 in both Version 8.1 of 2019 and the current Version 9 (fsolt.org/swiid; accessed July 7, 2021). Thus, as with traditional values, the United States actually does not seem to suffer from the deep inequality that they declare as problematic.

In their structuralist analysis, López and Luna (2021) also include domestic ethnic fractionalization; however, this factor (contrary to anti-immigration sentiment) rarely has been theorized as shaping populism's impact on democracy (except see Madrid 2008). Therefore, I do not see much theoretical justification.

Proceeding with the theoretically and empirically debatable inclusion of socioeconomic and ethnic inequality, López and Luna inexplicably fail to consider "the mother" of all structural conditions of democracy: socioeconomic development and modernization.

Proceeding with the theoretically and empirically debatable inclusion of socioeconomic and ethnic inequality, López and Luna inexplicably fail to consider "the mother" of all structural conditions of democracy: socioeconomic development and modernization. As advocates of structuralism, their omission is rather surprising. After all, development has found the single, strongest, most consistent corroboration in the analysis of democracy's origins, by far. After decades of tests with multiple methods (e.g., Przeworski et al. 2000; Teorell 2010, 57–58, 63–70), scholars of different theoretical persuasions agree about this factor's fundamental importance (especially Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 29–31, 35–36), particularly as a safeguard against democratic reversals.

Even during the crisis-wracked interwar years, development and modernization—by undergirding vibrant civil societies, institutionalized party systems, and democratic legacies—helped democracy survive the assault of communism, fascism, and authoritarianism in all advanced countries of Northwestern Europe (Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020, 71–93). Similarly, socioeconomic development has protected democracy against recent threats by reinforcing "resilience to the onset of autocratization" (Boese et al. 2021, 885–86, 896–97), drastic breakdown, and incumbent takeover (Svolik 2015, 725–26, 732–35).

Advocates of structural analysis should include this extremely important factor. Why instead highlight socioeconomic inequality, despite weak theoretical and empirical support? This unexplained selectivity appears problematic, especially for analyzing the prospects of US democracy. After all, the United States ranks very high on socioeconomic development. According to current scholarship, high per-capita GDP alone should make democracy in advanced countries like the United States "impregnable" against downfall (Przeworski 2019, 33–34).

By contrast, the United States scores worse on socioeconomic and ethno-racial inequality. It is not surprising that with their emphasis on those structural factors—and only those—López and Luna (2021) arrive at more pessimistic conclusions. Yet, are these conclusions mainly an artifact of their own selectivity and their problematic coding on income inequality? In summary, López and Luna's efforts to go beyond my parsimonious focus on institutions and conjunctural opportunities—two factors that I did not simply choose but rather derived from the very definition of populism—appear unconvincing.

METHODOLOGICAL AND CODING ISSUES

Pluralist democracy faces many threats, all of which deserve thorough analysis. Given the space limitations of a journal article, I focused on one specific threat. Because the global wave of populism aroused enormous concern, I probed democracy's suffocation by populist chief executives, a type of "incumbent takeover" (Svolik 2015; see Weyland 2020, 391)—not democratic backsliding or breakdown in general. Consequently, I did not score the military-enforced ouster of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 as a case of democracy's strangulation by a populist president; after all, it was not an incumbent takeover. If López and Luna choose to examine another outcome, that choice does not detract from my clearly specified analysis.

Regarding other coding issues raised by López and Luna (2021, 424), Bulgaria's governmental system is classified as semi-presidential (Ganev 1999) in the major project on *Semi-Presidentialism in Europe* (Elgie 1999). Hydrocarbon windfalls are temporary rents, as produced (for instance) by the commodities boom of the early twenty-first century. In Ecuador, these windfalls benefited populist Correa but neither earlier populists, Bucaram and Gutiérrez, nor Correa's hand-picked successor Moreno who, as I highlighted (see my 2020 online appendix, p. 7), was not a populist. However, Moreno's prodemocratic turn was instructive (Weyland 2020, 397).

Trying to draw on Ragin's (1987) approach to medium-N analysis, I summarized my arguments and findings in Boolean notation. In this effort, I did not consider "negative" terms (i.e., absent factors), as López and Luna (2021) note. After all, preceding sections of my article introduced different types of institutional weakness as alternatives, such that the presence of one weakness automatically implied the others' absence. Because I regard "easy changeability" as inherent in parliamentary systems of government, I did not see the need explicitly to stipulate the absence of "paralegal change," for instance, which my prior discussion associated with presidential systems.

My thinking on conjunctural opportunities was similar: the presence of a conjunctural opportunity is what is crucial, not the absence of another opportunity. Thus, in each path and corresponding type of populism, the combination of a specific type of institutional weakness and a distinct (combination of) conjunctural opportunity effectively accounts for the outcome, without requiring the *absence* of other conjunctural opportunities. For instance, Fujimori's political success depended on the resolution of acute economic and security crises, not the absence of a hydrocarbon windfall; huge extra resources would have further strengthened Fujimori. Thus, along my three paths to democratic suffocation, specific conjunctural opportunities give populist

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leaders enough clout to take advantage of a specific institutional weakness and push aside any remaining obstacles to authoritarian hegemony. The *absence* of other conjunctural opportunities does not appear as a decisive additional requirement. Populist leaders are opportunistic and will exploit any opportunity they encounter; they do not benefit from a lack of opportunities.

My theory emphasizes crises as *potential opportunities* for populist leaders. Accordingly, I code as crisis an acute, severe problem that erupts *before* a populist's assumption of power, giving the new chief executive the opportunity to prove his or her charisma by resolving the crisis, thereby winning massive support. Accordingly, my notion and coding of crisis-as-opportunity does not include problems exploding during a populist's term, which likely would weaken the incumbent. Consequently, the *absence* of such a crisis-as-opportunity limits—rather than benefits—a populist chief executive. For these reasons, my summary considered only the present, operative factors and failed to list the "negative" terms (i.e., absent factors).

López and Luna overcome this technical omission (see their online appendix, p. 2) by using the minimization algorithms and software of crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis. Just as the present, operative factors highlighted in my summary aligned in three combinations and pathways, so does López and Luna's reanalysis find the same three pathways. It adds several absent factors to my causal combinations—namely, unavailable opportunities and absent types of institutional weakness (arising, e.g., from the absence of presidentialism under parliamentarism).

From this methodological improvement, López and Luna do not draw substantive conclusions that diverge from the comparative lessons of my theory. The unavailability of certain opportunities, for instance, does not seem to make a difference and favor or reinforce populism's asphyxiation of democracy. For instance, the *absence* of a crisis—theorized and coded as a potential opportunity (as previously explained)—does not strengthen a populist chief executive; if anything, it limits the chances for power concentration and executive takeover. Consequently, explanatory power seems to lie primarily in the present, operative factors that my sparse summary had listed.

COMPARATIVE LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

López and Luna then go beyond this reanalysis and introduce various modifications, based on their theoretical and methodological challenges to my approach. It is interesting, however, that as López and Luna (2021, 424) acknowledge, the comparative lessons arising from my theory for the United States are strikingly robust to their proposed adjustments, made separately: US democracy continues to appear quite safe from breakdown and populist strangulation.

Only when López and Luna go further and combine various adjustments do some scenarios emerge that suggest vulnerabilities in US democracy. However, these scenarios stand on the shaky ground discussed previously and therefore are problematic. For instance, all four of López and Luna's combinations of factors that are associated with "democratic breakdown" (not my dependent variable, which is populist suffocation of democracy) (see fig. 2, p. 425) depend—as a necessary condition—on high inequality, and three of the four depend on traditional values as another necessary condition as well. Furthermore, the fourth scenario depends—as a necessary condition!—on the "easy changeability" inherent in parliamentarism: In the United States? Moreover, all of the other scenarios rest on questionable scores for the United States on inequality and values, as shown previously. Finally, none of these scenarios considers high socioeconomic development, according to Przeworski (2019, 33), an "impregnable" safeguard for democracy. With all of these problems, their conclusions—which are more pessimistic than mine—appear unpersuasive.

In López and Luna's scenarios, one condition that could create risks of a "democratic breakdown" in the United States is "the possibility of economic and security crises occurring in the US," which "some scholars might claim…is already" the case "due to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the insurrection by Trump loyalists" (López and Luna 2021, 424–25). However, these crisis claims are questionable. The January 6 takeover of the US Capitol was far from involving 5,000+ insurgents fighting the state, as I defined a security crisis (see my 2020 online appendix, p. 4). The massive guerrilla insurrections in Colombia and Peru qualified but not the much more limited, less lethal violence of the —undeniably disturbing—US militias. Contrary to the Andean fighters, the heterogeneous, fragmented US groupings lacked any plan for an armed seizure of the government; after invading the building, they soon withdrew.

Rather than detracting from my inference that the populist suffocation of democracy is unlikely in the contemporary United States, López and Luna's minimization procedure corroborates and may even solidify this prediction.

Moreover, rather than detracting from my inference that the populist suffocation of democracy is unlikely in the contemporary United States, López and Luna's minimization procedure corroborates and may even solidify this prediction. By adding necessary conditions to the combinations specified in my summary, their reanalysis does not make democracy's strangulation appear any easier or more likely—if anything, it is less likely. After all, with additional necessary conditions, an outcome never becomes *more* common. Consequently, López and Luna's (2021) methodologically superior replication analysis of my data leaves unchanged the encouraging implications for US democracy's likely resilience to populism, thereby confirming my forecast.

Regarding the economy, crises do not tend to become very severe in advanced countries such as the United States, which, moreover, dispose of ample resources for compensatory spending (Wibbels 2006). Even after the dramatic economic collapse caused by COVID-19, a powerful recovery—fueled in part by compensatory spending—quickly erased most damage. Consequently, real GDP in 2020 fell by only 3.5% (US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2021), less than my -5% threshold for an economic crisis. Thus, even under the exceptional circumstances of 2020–2021, the

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United States did not suffer an economic or security crisis, which limits the persuasiveness of López and Luna's scenarios.

Moreover, in my theory and coding, COVID-19 did not constitute a crisis-as-opportunity for Trump but rather a vexing, not easily solvable problem that defied his charismatic claim of salvation. After all, the pandemic did not precede Trump's election (cf. my 2020 online appendix, p. 4) but irrupted during his term, and there was no quick fix that could have boosted his support (cf. Weyland 2022). COVID-19 provided an opportunity for only his—nonpopulist—successor.

The resilience of US democracy, which withstood the unusual turbulence of 2020–2021, corroborated my emphasis on the long-standing solidity of US institutions as reliable safeguards against populist suffocation. This fundamental institutional strength is anchored in an age-old, rarely amended constitution, which has survived all socioeconomic, demographic, ethno-racial, and cultural transformations and which therefore is immune to López and Luna's endogeneity concerns. This institutional solidity—in my terms, the absence of "paralegal change" and "high instability," which enabled some Latin American populists to strangle democracy (Weyland 2020, 394–99)—cannot be simply disregarded, as López and Luna do in their scenarios.

This institutional strength played a crucial role in foiling Trump's typically populist attempts at self-perpetuation. Trump's sustained pressures put judicial, administrative, and political institutions to a distressingly serious test—yet, overall, they passed. The US populist achieved nothing with dozens of court challenges against election results across the country. Furthermore, even Republican election officials stood firm and properly counted all votes. Famously, Brad Raffensperger refused to "find" the 11,780 votes that the incumbent was so desperately seeking. Moreover, Trump's own vice president faithfully oversaw the Senate's certification of the election results. Similarly, despite widespread Republican sympathies, the military—which power-hungry Latin American populists use as a decisive support base—complied with professional rules and avoided participating in Trump's machinations (Brooks 2021).

Thus, the US institutional framework held and sealed the populist's defeat. These institutions are not "easily changeable" because of resilient checks and balances and a firm constitution; neither are they vulnerable to significant "paralegal change" or do they suffer from "high instability." Thus, US institutions are immune from the three types of institutional weakness that—in specific combinations with conjunctural opportunities—are required for the populist asphyxiation of democracy (Weyland 2020, 392–99).

There is no justification for omitting the latter two institutional factors from the analysis, as López and Luna do. Because their scenarios that suggest more pessimistic inferences than my theory depend on this elimination, they are unconvincing. The importance of US institutions for Trump's downfall corroborates my investigation and contradicts López and Luna's (2021) challenges.

CONCLUSION

Scholarly progress depends on scrutiny and criticism. Accordingly, I welcome López and Luna's critical efforts and acknowledge their methodological improvement of my Boolean notation.

The resilience of US democracy, which withstood the unusual turbulence of 2020–2021, corroborated my emphasis on the long-standing solidity of US institutions as reliable safeguards against populist suffocation.

However, I hope to have shown that all other aspects of my investigation—especially the substantive findings, comparative lessons, and inferences about the likely immunity of the United States to the populist suffocation of democracy—can withstand scrutiny. By contrast, López and Luna's disregard for crucial institutional factors and their strikingly selective turn to structuralist and culturalist arguments, which could reinforce concern about US democracy, has many theoretical and empirical problems. Although there are worrisome attempts at gradual institutional erosion in the United States (*The Economist* 2021), I therefore expect that if he is reelected in 2024, Donald Trump likely will again fail to smother US democracy.

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