

Exploring the origins of polarizing populism: Insights from the Peronist struggle over rights

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Abstract:

Much of the literature on populism, including that on Peronism in Argentina, focuses on the us/them, good versus evil, nature of populist rhetoric as instrumental in polarizing society and eroding democracy. This work challenges this perspective by placing an analysis of Peron's speeches (from 1943 to 1955) within the pre-existing historical context of division between urban elites and poor rural masses. The work argues that Peronist rhetoric, while shaped by this context, nevertheless developed its core populist features over time. Initially, Peronist discourse displayed conciliatory and inclusive features. It is only from 1949 that a Manichean discourse emerges, the consequence of an interactive process in which both Peronism and anti-Peronism become radicalized, each side responding to rhetoric and actions taken by opponents. Contestation comes to center on the issue of political versus social rights. These findings suggest that the widespread focus on populist rhetorical features as instrumental in creating political polarization may obfuscate more complex underlying processes. *Keywords:* Populism, democracy, social welfare, inequality, Argentina, Peronism.

Resumen: Explorando los orígenes del populismo polarizador: Ideas sobre la lucha peronista por los derechos

Gran parte de la bibliografía sobre el populismo, incluida la relativa al peronismo en Argentina, se centra en la naturaleza del nosotros/ellos, el bien contra el mal, de la retórica populista como instrumento polarizador de la sociedad y erosionador de la democracia. Este trabajo desafía esta perspectiva al situar un análisis de los discursos de Perón (de 1943 a 1955) dentro del contexto histórico preexistente de división entre las élites urbanas y las masas rurales pobres. El trabajo argumenta que la retórica peronista, aunque moldeada por este contexto, desarrolló sin embargo sus rasgos populistas fundamentales a lo largo del tiempo. Inicialmente, el discurso peronista mostraba rasgos conciliadores e inclusivos. Sólo a partir de 1949 surge un discurso maniqueo, consecuencia de un proceso interactivo en el que tanto el peronismo como el antiperonismo se radicalizan, respondiendo cada bando a la retórica y a las acciones de los oponentes. La contestación llega a centrarse en la cuestión de los derechos políticos frente a los sociales. Estos hallazgos sugieren que el enfoque generalizado en las características retóricas de las listas populares como instrumento para crear la polarización política puede ofuscar procesos subyacentes más complejos. *Palabras clave:* Populismo, democracia, bienestar social, desigualdad, Argentina, peronismo.

Introduction

The recent rise in populisms throughout the globe has spurred an upsurge in literature on a phenomenon that has long been a feature of Latin American politics.¹ Much of the literature, including that on Peronism in Argentina, has focused on the role of the populist leader and populist rhetoric in exacerbating political polarization and thereby eroding democratic practices.² There is now a scholarly consensus that populism is characterized by a few core ideas, involving a Manichean struggle of good versus evil. On the one side, there is the pure, good people, who hold the truth; on the other side is an evil, corrupt and conspiring elite (Laclau, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). It is this ideational understanding of populism that is the focus of this work.

This work analyses one of the most polarizing populisms in history, that of Peronism in Argentina between 1943 and 1955, and draws attention to the role of anti-Peronism in contributing to populism's polarizing rhetoric. Juan Domingo Perón, a colonel in the Argentine military, gained prominence with the military coup of 1943 when he was appointed Minister of Labour. He was later elected president in 1946 and 1951. Much of the work on Peronism, like that on populism in general, focuses on the antagonizing impact of Peronist/populist rhetoric and authoritarian actions. Through an examination of Perón's speeches, from 1943 to 1955, this work argues that Peronism developed its core features over time, in relation to these two aspects of oppositional attitudes and behaviour. Peronism displayed conciliatory and inclusive features, particularly initially, and provided a coherent and compelling narrative that went beyond populism's widely accepted core features.

Work on the origins of Peronism has generally coincided with the broader understandings of populism, which links the rise of populist leaders to social/economic and representational crises (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pineiro, Rhodes-Purdy & Rosenblatt, 2016; Weyland, 2017). Some of the earliest and best-known literature on Peronism identified the role of structural conditions, in particular, import substitution industrialization and rural urban migration in accounting for the rise of Peronism (Di Tella, 1964; Germani, 1955). This perspective understood Peronism as a consequence of the susceptibility of recent unorganized migrants to authoritarian populist mobilization, a viewpoint that coincides with the general view of populism as a top-down movement, mobilizing supporters by attacks on an "enemy" responsible for their political exclusion (Pineiro et al., 2016; Weyland, 2017). This perspective, however was challenged by research arguing the important role of pre-existing worker organizational leaders, which saw Peronism as an effective way to have material demands addressed (Murmis & Portantiero, 1971, p. 76; James, 1988, p. 22). Other scholars have identified the crucial role of lower-class socio/cultural identity in Peronist support. Karush and Chamosa (2010, p. 2), for example, characterize Perón's rise to power as a "cultural conflict" dividing Argentina into two irreconcilable cultures: Peronist, and anti-Peronist.

The literature described above has provided important insights into the rise and nature of Peronism in that it draws our attention to the centrality of history and context. This article treats another key aspect of context that appears to have been important in shaping Peronist rhetoric and popular attitudes: Oppositional (anti-Peronist) attitudes and actions, without ignoring the fact that Peronism itself contributed to the shaping of those attitudes and actions. Most analyses assume that populisms emerge with fully constituted ideational populist core features. The data presented in this work suggests that these core features did not initially predominate in Peronist rhetoric; rather, they emerged over time. In fact, Peronism's primary concern was the expansion of social rights. This objective, fiercely resisted by an opposition that also vilified Peronist supporters, contributed to the intensity and nature of Peronist's populist rhetorical features. Hence, the struggle between social and political rights emerges as at the root of the Peronist/anti-Peronist struggle, a struggle often obfuscated by much of the literature's focus on the Manichean feature of Peronist rhetoric.

The historical origins of a divided nation

Early elite cultural disparagement of the poor of the rural interior of the country provides the starting point for the country's political polarization. The ruling elite of late nineteenth-century Argentina continued the intellectual trajectory of earlier intellectuals, such as Juan Bautista Alberdi, and Domingo Sarmiento, in its propagation of the notion that Argentina must be white and Europeanized.³ The differences between the poor of the rural interior, constituted of Blacks, mulattos, Indigenous, *mestizos*, small producers, and *gauchos*, and the urban middle and upper classes was so profound that Semán characterizes nineteenth-century Argentina as constituting two distinct nations "in a war in which the existence of one depended on the annihilation of the other" (2021, p. 82). As the country urbanized and industrialized between 1870 and 1920, this deep social division was exacerbated by rising levels of socio-economic inequality (Alvaredo, Cruces, & Gasparini, 2018, p. 7). A constant feature of elite and later middle-class vilification of the masses was the perception of them as violent, with an irrational propensity to strong personal loyalty to ruthless strong-men (*caudillo*) leaders. The masses were, therefore, a threat to political order and to national progress.

The cultural identity of an expanding urban middle and upper class that took pride in its white European identity, favouring American jazz and European film, contrasted sharply with the culture of the urban poor's preference for Argentine film and the tango (Karush, 2010). As industrialization and rural/urban migration progressed, daily contact between the country's urban middle and upper classes and its lower classes became increasingly unavoidable as migrants from the interior began to occupy urban space and entered politics through strikes and protests. These developments culminated in the election of the reformist Radical government of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-1922 and

1928-1930), whose strong personal leadership, promises of social reform, and claim that he was a true representative of the people, foreshadowed Peronist appeal, deepening the fear and sense of threat felt by the urban middle and upper classes. Terms of disparagement, such as *chusma* (rabble) and *cabecitas negras*, to refer to the perceived uncivilized behavior and mixed/Indigenous ancestry of Yrigoyen supporters, arose during this period (Horowitz, 2008, p. 26; Grimson, 2016, p. 41).

Perón, having been appointed Minister of Labour in 1943, became increasingly popular due to his support for reforms benefitting workers. This development contributed further to middle and upper classes verbal vilification of Peronists as violent and vulgar, a perspective also voiced by the Socialist and Communist parties at the time. While the term *cabecitas negras* continued to be used by anti-Peronists, the label *descamisados* (without jackets and therefore poor), first used by the Socialist Party publication *La Vanguardia* in October 1945, entered the anti-Peronism lexicon to indicate the inferior nature of Peronist supporters (Grimson, 2016, p. 29). Through the 1940s, cultural disparagement of the lower classes was repeatedly echoed in publications supported by intellectuals and politicians. The source of Argentine polarization then, cannot be laid exclusively at the doorstep of Peronist rhetoric or actions. Anti-lower-class attitudes were already deeply entrenched before the 1940s. Peronist rhetoric, as presented later in this work, in its defence of the culture and dignity of the masses, can be seen as a response to this vilification – as a voice demanding not only improved social welfare for the masses but also respect for their cultural identity.

The legacy of the elite attitude toward the masses combined with the international context to further reinforce the opposition's hostility to Peronism. Pre-occupied with the rise of fascism in Europe and fearing its emergence in Argentina, the Peronist opposition saw the military coup of 1943 and its ensuing political repression (closures of the opposition press, the persecution and imprisonment of opposition leaders, the proscription of political parties) as signifying the rise of Argentine fascism. Perón's opponents (spanning the political spectrum) equated Argentina's nineteenth-century *caudillo* leader of the Black and mixed blood masses of the interior, Manuel Rosas, with Perón and both with Nazism and with fascism – since all involved leaders using demagoguery to manipulate the ignorant and uncultured masses. (Nállim, 2006, p. 14).

The notion that Peronism was an Argentine form of fascism became prevalent not only among the Peronist opposition, but was popular with the US government at the time (particularly with its Argentine ambassador, Spruille Braden), and with the academic community.⁴ The fact that the Argentine extreme right, which supported the 1943 coup, adhered to a form of fascism combined with Perón's declaration of his admiration of Mussolini early in his career, lent support to this interpretation. Those opposed to this perspective saw Peronism as representing a substantive form of political and social incorporation of the working, including the granting social rights (James, 1988, p.

16). Not only did Peronism provide substantive benefits to that class (as opposed to the middle class under European fascism), but unlike fascism it evolved from a dictatorship to an electoral authoritarian democracy and never actually promoted total war or took measures to annihilate political opponents (Finchelstein, 2014, pp. 66, 90).

Table 1. Numbers and proportion of speeches by theme (N = 72)

Theme	1943-1948	1949-1954	1955	Total speeches per theme	% of speeches dealing with themes (N =72)		
Conciliation, appeasement	14	33%	4	15%	2	20	28%
Rejection of conciliation	1	2%	9	35%	1	11	15%
Derogatory depiction of the opposition	14	33%	20	77%	1	35	49%
Opposition to Imperialism	4	10%	11	42%	0	15	21%
Dignity, respect	15	36%	10	38%	0	24	33%
Poverty, misery, redistribution	28	67%	20	77%	1	49	68%
Manichean struggle	6	14%	10	38%	2	18	25%
Total speeches per period	42	58%	26	36%	4		

Sources: Perón, Mensaje Presidencial. Congreso Nacional. Asamblea Legislativa, 1946-1955; Instituto Nacional Juan Domingo Perón⁵

As shown in Table 1⁶, more speeches dealt with social justice issues than any other issue throughout the Perón years: Sixty-eight percent overall. Further reinforcing the observation of the regime's overwhelming concern with issues of social justice and redistribution is the fact that no speech to Congress ever contained less than seven such references, with an average number of ten social justice references for Congressional speeches, a figure higher than for any other of the themes analyzed in this work. Social conditions and the inability of the country's liberal democratic institutions to expand social protection contributed to this rhetorical focus. While the Radical government enacted a Pension Plan in 1923, intense opposition from employers, and opposition from the Unions and the political left, led by the Socialists, who claimed the new law was inadequate and a reflection of political demagoguery (Horowitz 2008, p.

99), resulted in the repeal of the Pension Law in 1926. What social security the Radical Party did establish benefited largely the country's middle class (Mesa-Lago, 1978, p. 161). The ensuing political turmoil, further exacerbated by the context of the Great Depression, prompted a military coup in 1930, ushering in the "infamous decade" (1930 to 1943), a period of electoral fraud and repression that kept social reform off the political agenda. Unemployment increased, wages declined, and labour conditions deteriorated.

Hence, Perón's popularity was fuelled not only by his defense of the cultural dignity of his followers (detailed in the following section) but also by his expressed concern and achievements in improving the social welfare of workers. As Minister of Labour, Perón encouraged unionization and strike activity and launched a wide range of material improvements: Collective bargaining, expanded pensions, severance pay, accident insurance, paid vacation, improvements for the rural poor, and funds for worker housing. None of these achievements, however, sat well with the country's conservative parties or with powerful economic interests.

In June of 1945, the major business organizations issued a Manifesto, supported by all the political parties, highly critical of Perón's social policies, characterizing them as a fascist demagoguery (Grimson, 2016, p. 2). The increase in strikes combined with the rise in costs for wages and benefits aroused business fears of the erosion of profits. Business, along with the middle and upper classes, supported by the opposition political parties, staged a national protest march in September 1945 during which the opposition described Perón as a demagogue, compared him to Mussolini, and labelled his supporters as violent hordes (Nállim 2006, p. 17). The Peronist opposition interpreted the 1943 coup and the ensuing repressive measures as justification for Perón's removal from power. The army forced Perón to resign leading to a spontaneous gathering of thousands of workers on October 17 1945 in the country's central square (*Plaza de Mayo*) demanding (and achieving) Perón's reinstatement. This event had a profound impact on the opposition and on the country's middle and upper classes; they reacted with fear and indignation at the presence and power of the masses and anti-Peronism increased in intensity. In 1946, Perón won the presidency with 52.8 percent of the popular vote, against an electoral alliance, known as the Democratic Union, comprised of the Radical Party, the Conservatives, the Socialist, and Communist parties. The opposition, apparently surprised by the Peronist victory, regarded the win as illegitimate, claiming that it has been due to pre-election fraud, manipulation, and demagoguery (Pizzorno 2018, p. 15). Thereafter, opposition supported publications pursued a relentless campaign against the government.

Peronist rhetoric and the issue of cultural and social exclusion

Reaction to opposition disparagement of the lower classes, now transferred to Peronist supporters, was a consistent features of Peronist rhetoric. Perón de-

manded that the opposition abandon what he characterized as their contempt, even hatred, of his followers and Peronist elected members of Congress. While the proportion of speeches challenging the characterization of his followers as inferior and lacking in culture and education remained consistent across the time periods (Table 1), these figures underestimate Perón's rhetorical appeal based on this issue. Virtually every speech by Perón to his supporters addressed the audience as *descamisados*. Although Perón and Eva Perón converted this term of disparagement into one of endearment, the use of the term would have been a constant reminder to Peronist supporters of the contempt with which the opposition held them. Perón maintained that this type of opposition and denigration of his supporters had inflicted great misery on them causing "suffering and tears" and was reflective of the need for "some" in Argentine society to be "dispossessed of hate" (Perón, 1944c, p. 30).

Although Perón made frequent reference to *criollo* (lower/working class) culture as authentically Argentine, his plea was one for inclusion in a nation whose leaders, he maintained, had historically regarded the lower classes as having little to contribute to national progress. In a speech to Congress, Perón calls for a more inclusionary concept of the nation: One that does not exclude others but does include his supporters. He says,

The nation is not the patrimony of the learned, much less of the wealthy, *but it is constituted by everyone, by the rich and by the poor* [my italics], by the educated and the ignorant. Life is constituted by all of us, every day. It is true that without science and intelligence we would lead a primitive existence, but it is not less true that without physical effort, without manual skill, the [lives] of the intelligent would be very limited in their activities. *The culture of the modest workers may be deficient* [my italics], but they know better than anyone the necessities and problems of the weakest (Perón, 1947, p. 8).

In his 1950 speech to Congress, Perón criticizes the opposition's description of the electoral victory of Peronism as a beastly flood (loose translation of *aluvión zoológicos*). His declaration that, contrary to this defamation, Peronists were defenders of national dignity, earned him a standing ovation from members of Congress and from those in the public gallery (Perón, 1950, p. 9). In the years that followed, he continued to complain about the hate and contempt shown by the opposition to his supporters. This rhetorical defense against social and cultural vilification of lower classes, although central to Peronist discourse, is seldom highlighted as a core feature of populism. However, elite and middle-class disparagement of the masses was one of the main aspects of Argentina's polarized condition, with pre-existing historical origins, and integral to the evolution of Peronist rhetoric. Only Perón and Peronists defended the cultural identity of supporters. As we will see, the Peronist narrative would link this cultural exclusion (framed as contempt for the masses) to the opposition's resistance to Perón's social justice agenda.

Peronism: Early conciliatory rhetoric

Despite opposition hostility (vilification of Peronist supporters as inferior, opposition to Perón's social justice agenda, and its questioning of the legitimacy of his 1946 elector win), and contrary to widely accepted understandings of populist rhetoric as consistently and overwhelmingly bellicose, Peronist rhetoric contained a high proportion of conciliatory gestures until late 1948. As shown in Table 1, conciliatory rhetoric is found throughout Perón's tenure in power, but occurs in a higher proportion of speeches prior to 1949 than afterwards. As shown in Table 1, 33 percent of the speeches contained conciliatory statements before 1949, while an even higher percentage (40 percent, or 8 of 20 speeches) delivered between 1946 and 1948 contained such sentiments. In addition, the number of conciliatory references within speeches to Congress is higher before 1949 than after: There are six such references in Perón's 1946 speech to Congress, six in 1947, and thirteen in his 1948 speech to Congress. These numbers contrast with those of the 1949 to 1954 period when the proportion of speeches with conciliatory references declines to 4 (or 15 percent of speeches) with only 1 reference within each of the 1951, 1952, and 1953 speeches to Congress, and none in the 1954 and 1955 Congressional speeches.

One interpretation of Perón's conciliatory more inclusive rhetoric argues the simultaneous coexistence within populism of two contradictory tendencies. One involves the desire to achieve a rupture from the old order by claiming representation of only a part of the people (the plebs), a position that involves sharp confrontation. At the same time, there is the contradictory urge to establish hegemony through the representation of the entire national community, a strategy that seeks to resolve the conflict within and elicit compromise (Aboy Carlés, 2007). The finding of a significant proportion of conciliatory statements supports this interpretation as does the fact that the proportion of speeches characterizing the opposition in a derogatory way was considerably less before 1949 than afterwards – 33 percent versus 77 percent (Table 1), suggestive of a desire for appeasement in this initial period. The number of references within Congressional speeches further reinforces this interpretation: The 1946 speech to Congress contained no derogatory references to the opposition, the 1947 speech contained one, the 1948 speech two, and the 1949 speech two. However, the 1950 speech to Congress made six derogatory references to the opposition, the 1951 speech eight, with the number climbing to twelve such references by 1953. As shown in Table 1, Perón's characterization of the country's political conflict as a struggle between good and evil, although ever-present, occurs in a lower proportion of speeches before 1949.

Perón's desire for collaboration with his political opponents would seem to contradict the objective of polarizing society by fostering an “us/them” mentality. His often-reiterated position in this early period was that redistributive justice to address the social needs of workers was the best way to diminish worker

unrest and ensure social peace. To this end, he assured business owners that they were a vital part of the nation and asked for their collaboration, declaring:

We must call on the unity of all Argentines of good will so that we meet as brothers... Business owners, workers and the state all constitute part of the social problem. They and no others must be the ones to solve [those problems]... Unity and mutual understanding of these three groups must be the base with which to struggle against the real social enemies represented by false politics, foreign ideologies (Perón, 1943).

Aware of business opposition to his social programs due to their cost, Perón attempted to calm business fears by clarifying that improvements for workers would not always be “at the expense of the employer but may involve measures that increase production” (1943). His 1946 speech to Congress promised that he would “not restrict private initiative or the activities of private capital as long as the liberties of others are respected” while his 1947 speech reminded members that he supports private capital (a point made repeatedly in his speeches), that he is only opposed to “cold and calculating super capitalism,” and pledged that in labour issues there would be “no swerves to the right or the left.” His objective, which he would also claim repeatedly, was to “humanize capital” (1947, pp. 21-22).

Both before (1943 to 1945) and after taking office as president (from 1946 to 1948) there are an abundance of remarks suggesting a desire to reduce political differences. In a speech to the nation, he called for an end to struggles and conflicts “that are inspired by hate” (1944a, p. 20) and in a speech to port workers he declared his distress at the fact that there are Argentines who are “enemies of each other” (1944b, p. 24). An indication of Perón’s restraint is perhaps best seen, however, in the speech he gave upon his return to office on October 17, 1945. That speech contains no derogatory references to the opposition; instead, it asks that his supporters remain calm, and requests that there be no mobilizations.

As president, his 1946 to 1948 addresses to Congress usually tried to mitigate opposition politicians’ hostility. His 1946 speech, for example, expressed the hope that the opposition members would “add their collaboration” to the work of the nation while his 1947 speech declared his respect “for all the ideas expressed publicly” (Perón, 1947, p. 7) despite what he believed were insults from the press. His 1948 speech to Congress asked Peronist representatives, members of this own party, “to disengage from aggression and gossip,” declaring that “I never forget that as the holder of executive power, I am president of all Argentines.” He goes on to appeal for “internal agreement,” adding that “Together we must support our country casting aside the despicable issues that have been used to justify the division of the Argentine family” (Perón, 1948a, p. 15). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that Perón did blame past governments for the misery of workers, a position that likely gave rise to the anger and heightened levels of fear among his political opponents. He also

made use of the term oligarchy to refer to the opposition, and included not just past politicians and their powerful economic supporters in this category, but also the socialists and communists, who, he claimed, had failed to reflect the true interests of workers and who were, in his view, tied to oligarchy (Perón, 1948a, p. 34).

Interactive process of political polarization: Social versus political rights

As noted earlier, the historical legacy of elite vilification of the rural poor laid the groundwork for anti-populism's reaction to urban mass mobilization during the military regime (1943-1945). From 1949, the mutually reinforcing interaction between populism and anti-populism deepened political polarization. The 1949 Constitutional Reform marked the end of a period of relative regime tolerance of the opposition during which the House of Deputies had become a forum for political debate. The new document radicalized the opposition in that it strengthened executive power by allowing for the reelection of the President, extending presidential veto powers, and making it easier to suspend constitutional guarantees and confer emergency powers on the president, raising fears of a substantial weakening in the role of parliament. Intensified opposition mobilization and vilification of Peronism was met with new authoritarian measures in 1951 that hurt the opposition's electoral chances, including a new electoral law and prohibition of electoral coalitions (García Sebastiani 2005, pp. 98, 237). Fearing that it would be unable to regain power by legal means, the opposition supported an attempted military coup in September of 1951, a move that prompted Perón to invoke a "state of internal war," which in suspending constitutional guarantees, facilitated increased repression. The opposition engaged in another military coup conspiracy in 1952 and was behind the April 1953 bombing of the central square, where Perón was giving a speech, killing six. In June 1954, Perón faced another failed coup, and in June 1955, there was another bombing of the central *Plaza de Mayo*. Perón was overthrown by military coup in September 1955.

While the Constitutional Reform restricted political freedoms and centralized power, it also sought to entrench social rights. It provided new guarantees for workers (the right to work, to a fair wage and to social security), for the aged, for the family, and the right to an education. It also enshrined the central role of the state, placing foreign trade, most energy sources, and public services (utilities) under state control – all of this regarded by the opposition as unwarranted interference by an increasingly authoritarian state. These developments perpetuated the opposition's condemnation of Perón's social justice agenda as demagoguery and to largely ignore social welfare issues, focusing instead on political rights. Hence, the opposition characterized salary increases and improved benefits as mechanisms to control and confuse workers (Semán, 2021, p. 126). The Socialist Party, Peronism's bitterest critic, derided Peronism as a totalitarian movement, refusing to acknowledge its social achievements. The

Radical Party, a party that included social issues in its formal 1951 electoral platform, instead focused its campaign on the regime's violation of public and civil liberties (García Sebastiani 2005, pp. 250-251).

Perón linked the resistance of the opposition to recognition of his social justice agenda and to the new Constitution to its contempt for the masses – to the belief in their inherent inferiority. In a speech on the constitution, Perón declared that his electoral wins and those of other Peronists demonstrated that the people supported the government's goal of constitutional reform and if the opposition were truly as democratic as it claimed, it would cease

verbal excesses against the authorities that the people have elected to govern all Argentine... [they would not] declare themselves against the people, *to insult them, to despise* [my italics] them because they do not vote for them (Perón, 1948b).

Perón categorically rejected the opposition claim that it was defending political liberty. He claimed that when the opposition "talks about liberty they are referring to their liberty with *contempt* [my italics] for the liberty of others" (Perón, 1949b, p. 13). Hence, those who oppose the constitution, he declares, are not fighting for democracy but are "fighting for privilege, against the people [*el pueblo*], against a 'just' community, against a democracy that recognizes the right of the people to elect and regulate their own destiny" (Perón, 1949c, p. 240). Given the poor track-record of past governments on social legislation and the opposition's failure to address social welfare measures due to its preoccupation with the regime's authoritarian tendencies, Perón expressed little faith in the ability of Argentine liberal democracy to deliver on social improvements. As he said in a speech to Congress, "While liberal democracy is flexible in its politics and economics, there was not equal flexibility in social problems" (Perón, 1949a). The priority for Perón, was social rights. Freedom of thought and expression alone, he claimed, were insufficient without "providing a means for equality of opportunity" so that all have the right to learn and improve themselves (Perón, 1948a, p. 21).

Peronist rhetoric hardens: The core feature of classic populism emerge

It is within the context of resistance to his social agenda and mounting opposition mobilization that, as shown in Table 1, the proportion of speeches with some conciliatory tone declines, while the proportion of speeches rejecting conciliation rises markedly, from 2 percent of speeches before 1949 to 35 percent from 1949 to 1954. Derogatory depiction of the opposition also increased to 77 from 33 percent of speeches, coincident with the rising level of oppositional mobilization against the regime. As noted earlier, this hardened position is also reflected in the numbers of references within speeches to Congress. New negative descriptive terms enter Perón's vocabulary as his characterization of the opposition becomes increasingly harsh. The term "evil" is used

more frequently as is the word “enemy.” Other derogatory terms used repeatedly include: “vermin,” “unscrupulous,” “scoundrels,” “slanderous,” “arrogant,” “criminal,” and “hateful.”

In his 1951 speech in commemoration of the events of October 17, Perón now emphasizes his “us versus them” position: “We owe it to the Homeland, at every moment, to defeat our external and internal enemies, up to the point of annihilating them if necessary” (Perón, 1951b, p. 68). In his 1952 speech to Congress, Perón speaks of the “evil nature” of the opposition’s intentions (1952, p. 13), and says that the opposition has “sold its soul to the devil” (1952, p. 16). In the same speech, it is now clear that efforts to appease business have been abandoned:

I confess that we have not yet been able to completely destroy the structures of capitalism that dominated our land for 100 years, but I declare with absolute certainty that this is already in sight (Perón, 1952, p. 14).

During a 1953 speech, as the sound of bombs is heard in the background, Perón declares that the next phase will involve “terrible force against those who continue to oppose our work,” and that if “it is necessary to change history with the title of tyrant, I will do so with pleasure” (1953a). He has abandoned any hope of discussion with the opposition. He calls for defeat of the anti-national and anti-popular opposition given that “the time employed in trying to convince them of their errors is time lost” (Perón, 1953b, p. 28).

A new dimension of Perón’s rhetoric from 1949 is his appeal to anti-imperialism, which when linked to the opposition, provides additional ammunition with which to vilify the opposition. As shown in Table 1, there is a sharp rise in rhetoric displaying opposition to imperialism from 1949. The relatively late upsurge in this component of Peronism is interesting given that opposition to imperialist meddling was a part of the 1946 election campaign and nationalization of most foreign owned companies occurred during the first two years of his first presidency.⁷ Statements about foreign domination before 1949 were, however, vague and brief. In his 1946 speech to the Legislative Assembly, for example, only passing references are made to “outside pressure” and to the country’s “dependence on the exterior.”

After 1949, Perón’s condemnation of imperialism surges and this censure is closely linked to issues of humiliation and lack of respect for the people – as was the case with his constitutional reform. He repeatedly expressed the belief that foreign interests were allied with the traitorous opposition in efforts to end his regime, threatening both the material welfare and the dignity of “the people.” In this narrative, the control of the economy by imperialism blocked the ability to improve the welfare of workers because industrialization required the nationalization of the foreign-owned companies that controlled large sectors of the economy. In his 1951 message to Congress, Perón says,

Foreign capital acquired the harvests and profits, transported by railroads that were foreign owned and in ships to foreign countries where people in foreign countries have bread and meat that was not on the tables of Argentine households (Perón, 1951a, p. 10).

Nationalization of foreign interests also signified an end to humiliation. In his 1951 speech to Congress, Perón says: “We do not want the homeland to return to be unjustly *subjugated and humiliated again* [my italics], having proclaimed our irrevocable decision to be just, free, and sovereign...” (1951a, p. 38). His 1952 speech to Congress reiterates the notion of cultural humiliation at the hands of the opposition/imperialist alliance whose members believe the people are inferior. Perón claims that international capitalism, with the active support of past governments, became the “absolute owners of the fundamental wealth of our land” under “the pretext of *civilizing us* [my italics] (Perón, 1952, p. 17). He further reinforces this narrative in his portrayal of the odium emanating from the international media about his regime. The leaders of imperialism, Perón claims, have “sabotaged our doctrine and attacked us on all fronts,” with “hatred and bitterness” (Perón, 1952, p. 14).

From 1949, the good, pure and wise people, with truth and justice on their side, are increasingly counterpoised against the evil opposition. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of speeches presenting the Peronist/opposition struggle in this way rises from 14 percent of speeches from 1946 to 1948 to 38 percent from 1949 to 1954. While Perón’s speeches reflected the sentiment that the people possessed wisdom and truth and that his cause and his government’s had justice and truth on their side, it is not until 1949 that the good and pure voice of the people is explicitly juxtaposed against the evil of the opposition and imperialism. “Only retrogrades and evil people” Perón declares would “oppose the improved well-being of those who before had all the obligations and were denied rights” (1949a). By 1949, the Peronist doctrine and the voice of the people is not only wise and good, but Perón is directed by “God’s call to interpret and structure our doctrine” (1949b, p. 11). The Peronist/anti-Peronist struggle becomes a choice between truth, love of the *patria*, and the humble *descamisados* against the opposition’s collusion with US imperialism, treason, and media subservience to capitalism. In the May 19, 1953, speech to the Legislative Assembly, Perón declares “Our work can only be achieved by the extraordinary combination of a people who are the voice of God and a God who never leaves the people” (Perón, 1953, p. 29) This latter statement was followed by shouts of approval, and a prolonged standing ovation.

1955: Conciliation and its rejection

Peronism’s rhetorical move to its Manichean apogee, however, did not eliminate its ability to consider some form of conciliation with the opposition. By mid-1955, Perón became open to conciliation and tones down his derogatory

remarks about the opposition. Two speeches, shortly after the June bombing (on July 5 and July 6, 1955) call for conciliation with the opposition. In a radio transmitted speech on July 6, he offers the opposition “our open hand.” Proclaiming that it is God’s will “that our bitter enemies abandon their hate,” he pledged to “cooperate in the common cause,” declaring that there is a common interest among all Argentines (Perón, 1955a). In response to the opposition’s rejection of conciliation, Perón’s last speech, however, delivered August 31, 1955, now takes a hard line. Returning to his Manichean view, he speaks of “the infamous acts of the enemies of the people” and advocates that “to violence we should respond with greater violence.” He goes on, “we have offered them peace. They did not want that. Now we offer them struggle. We fight to the end.” He declares, “know that this fight... does not end until we have annihilated and crushed them” (1955b).

Peronism, despite its development of a core of populist ideas and its apparent unbendable belief in the rightness of its cause, was, in the end, willing to engage in some form of conciliation with anti-Peronism, demonstrating that Peronism comprised conciliatory and pragmatic elements alongside the populist core ideas of the opposition as the enemy with which there are irreconcilable differences. Which one of these tendencies came to predominate at any given time was shaped by both historical context and opposition behavior: As suggested earlier, between 1943 and late 1948, Perón’s conciliatory tone may have sprung from hegemonic aspirations. However, opposition to Perón was relentless, the opposition did not recognize the legitimacy of his electoral wins, it continued its vilification of his supporters and opposition to his social reforms, and plotted to overthrow the government by military coup. These developments would have demonstrated not only the impossibility of any form of conciliation with the opposition but would also have encouraged more radical populist rhetoric geared to the mobilization of supporter resistance to the opposition. However, by 1955, it must have been clear to Perón that his removal from power was a distinct possibility, an event that would seriously threaten the regime’s social achievements – hence we see a brief move to conciliation. When Perón’s attempt at conciliation was rejected not just by the opposition but likely also by the masses,⁸ he had no choice but to return to his bellicose position – further indication of the contextually shaped nature of populist rhetoric.

Conclusions

Perón made a powerful appeal based on the cultural identity and material deprivation of the lower classes. Nineteenth-century ruling elite perception of the inhabitants of the interior as uncivilized and susceptible to unscrupulous political leaders was transferred to urban middle and upper-class attitudes towards the urban poor. These attitudes provided an important component of anti-Peronism and fueled Perón’s rhetorical defence of urban working-class dignity

and interests. However, while attitudes of the upper and later middle class constituted important ingredients in the evolution of Peronist rhetoric, Peronist authoritarian measures (those following the 1943 coup and the 1949 constitutional reform) fuelled the opposition's view that Peronism had fascist, totalitarian, objectives, encouraging ever stronger mobilization against the regime. The opposition's failure to acknowledge Peronist social reform (and even its opposition through its characterization of Peronist social achievements as a form of demagoguery), and its mobilization, particularly its coup plotting, helped to drive increasingly bellicose Peronist rhetoric. In this way, Argentine political polarization, between Peronism and anti-Peronism, were mutually constituted.

Perhaps the most fundamental point of contention between Peronist and anti-Peronists became the struggle over social and political rights. While anti-Peronists saw the struggle against Perón as that of reversing Peronist violation of political and civil rights, Peronist rhetoric came to characterize those who propounded the importance of political rights as using these concerns as an excuse to derail the establishment of social rights. Perón conveyed his belief that the opposition would not abandon its contempt for his supporters as inferior and vulgar, that it cared little about improvements in their material welfare, and did not regard Peronist elected representatives as worthy of sitting in Congress (as a "beastly flood"). These observations came to constitute the main lines of a narrative explaining why the political rights of political opponents should be curtailed. In this perspective, social rights outweighed political rights because Argentine liberal democracy, with its press and other freedoms, facilitated the ongoing humiliation of Peronist followers and labelled promises of social improvements as demagoguery. Not without some justification, Perón could claim that military rule and his authoritarian democracy had been better at delivering social rights than had the country's liberal democracy. While Perón sought the entrenchment of social rights and violated political rights, anti-Peronists privileged political rights and came to ignore social rights.

A careful consideration of Peronist rhetoric reveals the complex contours of the political polarization that emerged by the 1950s. Preoccupation with the widely accepted core features of populist rhetoric may have obfuscated some of the most important underlying processes driving Peronism. Perón's desire for the constitutional entrenchment of social rights, which coincided with a sharp rise in oppositional activity, was linked not only to his concern with issues of improved social welfare, but also to his demand that his followers be respected and recognized as part of the nation, an objective to be achieved not just through improvements in income, but also through access to education and opportunity. Casting off imperialist control was also presented as important to national dignity in that it involved a rejection of the foreign "civilizing mission."

This research challenges the widely accepted understanding of populism as exclusively a movement arising from unattended popular claims in which a political leader mobilizes support through a discourse involving a Manichean

struggle between the good people against an evil enemy. Rather, Peronist rhetoric was comprised of an important conciliatory inclusive tendency. Further, the ideational features of populism so widely accepted in the literature, in fact emerged over time. Importantly, a Manichean political interpretation characterized both sides of this struggle, with the Peronist version not fully emerging until after 1949. Both camps, Peronist and anti-Peronist, came to see the other side as the enemy.

Peronism arose from deep cultural differences, socio-economic deprivation, and a high level of socio-economic inequality. These conditions, although existing in exaggerated form in early twentieth-century Argentina, were not unique to twentieth-century Argentina. Twenty-first century Latin America retains these features. While there are important differences between twentieth and twenty-first century Latin American populisms, particularly in terms of its popular bases, the cultural differences and distributive attitudes of middle class and upper socio-economic groups may not have not altered substantially. These features likely remain critical in shaping populist rhetoric.

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Notes

- 1 This work refers to only some of the recently published literature directly pertinent to this work. For a review of the literature, including that on Latin America, see Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy (2017).
- 2 A notable exception is Laclau (2018), who argues the inclusionary nature of many populisms.
- 3 Argentine government policy encouraged European immigration producing an inflow of some 6 million European immigrants between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1900s (McAleer, 2018, p. 255).
- 4 For a summary of the two sides of the early debate about whether Peronism was a form of fascism (1950s to mid-1970s), see Lewis, 1980. Lewis argues for Peronism as a form

of fascism because of its authoritarian single party rule and corporatist organizational framework.

- 5 See <http://www.jdperon.gov.ar/1945/10/discursos/> and <http://archivoperonista.com/>. Speeches to trade unions: Unión del Personal Civil de la Nación (No year), Nos. 1 & 2; Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación (2016); Subdirección de Estudios y Archivos Especiales (2002).
- 6 For an explanation of the methodology used to construct this table see the Appendix.
- 7 Perón's election campaign in 1946 featured the slogan "Braden or Perón," which was Perón's response to the campaign carried out against his candidacy by the US ambassador.
- 8 An analysis of Perón's August 31 speech shows how the crowd's rejection of conciliation, through shouts showing disapproval of any such attempt, triggered Perón to make an abrupt turn toward a call for resistance (Vasallo, 2008).

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Appendix

This article analyses 72 speeches delivered by Perón between 1943 and 1955. Speeches address the general public, Congress, Peronist supporters, and an array of popular organizations. The breakdown of speeches by audience is as follows: 39 percent to the public (includes speeches to Congress), 19 percent to supporters (election rallies, etc.), 37 percent to trade union organizations and farmer groups, and 5 percent to the military and business. Many were transmitted by radio. The research involved a qualitative thematic analysis of the speeches by the author using NVivo. While original coding was based on searching out the widely accepted core ideational features of populist rhetoric as identified above, the process proceeded inductively with the addition of new themes, such as calls for conciliation, concerns for poverty and inequality, and anger at the vilification of followers. New nodes (thematic categories) were created when an idea or theme appeared repeatedly. The data was revisited two more times to ensure the validity and consistency of the both the original themes and the new ones. Table 1 provides the numbers and proportions of speeches that addressed themes most pertinent to the evolution of Peronism.

The category of “Conciliation/Appeasement” includes speeches calling for collaboration, claims that the leadership does not consider the opposition the “enemy,” statements that the leader considers the opposition (or sectors of it) legitimate/important part(s) of Argentina, pleas for the opposition to understand the importance of improving the lives of workers, and statements intended to appease the opposition, particularly reassurances related to the private sector. “Rejection of Conciliation” includes speeches with statements explicitly calling for a cessation of dialogue, calls to supporters to go into “battle,” calls for punishment of the opposition, and characterization of the opposition as “the enemy.” Speeches advocating opposition to imperialism involve criticism of imperialist meddling in domestic affairs, particularly its support for the opposition, while “Derogatory Depiction of the Opposition” involves criticisms of past and present behaviours and characteristics of the opposition. The category “Dignity, Respect” includes speeches that praise the historical role of Argentina’s working population and condemn perceived contempt for them. “Material Deprivation, Inequality” includes speech that make statements about the need for social justice, redistributive measures, condemnation of the gap between rich and poor, the need to end exploitation and poverty, along with descriptions of the specific measures to improve social well-being of workers, such as wage increases, social benefits, and housing. “Manichean Struggle” involves those speeches juxtaposing the good, wise and moral people, who are guided by Christ and God in their struggle, against an immoral and hate-filled opposition and its imperialist ally.

Reference to a theme consisted of a paragraph of 30 to 150 words, with the length of the reference varying according to the length of the speech. With the exception of speeches to Congress (which averaged over 20,000 words each),

speeches were 1500 to 2000 words and normally had one reference to particular themes. An exception with regard to the length of references are passages in Congressional speeches dealing with issues of social welfare. As these passages often described government policy, they could be longer than 130 words. While speeches to Congress often contained only one or two references to a particular theme, one important finding was that during times when there was an upsurge in the proportion of speeches dealing with a particular theme, there was also a notable increase in the number of references to that theme in speeches to Congress. I call attention to these cases when the data is presented. A few speeches dealt exclusively with one theme. This was the case for three speeches, discussed in in last section, “1955 Conciliation and Its Rejection”: Two were appeals for conciliation and the last speech a call for its rejection. Similarly, three speeches to popular supporters (one handing over housing to workers and two speeches to small agricultural producers), dealt exclusively with social justice issues.