

AMLO: Populist, or Man of the People?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/07/amlo-populist-or-man-of-the-people/>

DUKE MWEDZI, SEP 7 2020

The 2018 Mexican election has been described as the most important in the nation's history for good reason. The presidency and thousands of legislative positions were contested (Hinojosa & Meyer, 2019). Mexico has long been dominated by a single party, PRI, which lost its grip at the turn of the millennium (Sanchez-Talanquer, 2018). This also made the 2018 election one of the most competitive in recent memory. A central figure was Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known by his initials AMLO. This was Obrador's third attempt at the presidency and he ran with Morena, an ideologically diverse coalition party (Romero, 2018: 1). Obrador's campaign enjoyed vast support, and he was elected president with 53% of the votes (Romero, 2018: 1). While the exact nature of his policies is vague, Obrador has displayed leftist ideals by promising to care for the poor and establish a state healthcare system (Zavala, 2018). The ambiguity around his campaign attracted international scrutiny and he was branded a populist (Stevenson, 2018). The term populism has entered the mainstream consciousness as something of a buzzword, but it remains a nebulous and difficult concept to define. Obrador resembles other populists in many ways, but the reality is more complex. This essay will attempt to show why Obrador is a populist, but not to the same extent as some other political leaders.

Defining Populism

Conceptions of populism can take an ideational approach (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018: 3). From this perspective, populism is an approach that artificially bisects society into two groups, typically ordinary people against elites who have failed them (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018: 3). This positions populism as anti-elite and pro-people, lending democratic credibility to the movement (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018: 3). Populist movements are also anti-establishment, showing a disdain for dominant political structures and creating alternative ideals instead (Canovan, 1999: 4). Populist leaders undermine political institutions and emphasise these artificial binaries in society by simplifying issues in short, memorable snippets (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 387). This oversimplification creates a distinct style which is crude, emphasises a threat, and appeals to the people (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 391). For the purposes of analysing President Obrador, these elements will be combined to define populism as an anti-elite, anti-establishment movement that makes use of unorthodox political practices and draws widespread popular support. Obrador displays some of these characteristics, and each will be discussed in turn.

Anti-Establishment and Anti-Elite Discourse

Populist leaders tend to gain traction when voters become disgruntled with political leadership (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 391). Former president Enrique Peña Nieto's government was riddled with corruption and many officials were found to be connected to organised crime (Morris, 2012: 29). Mexico is also afflicted with violent crime and high murder rates, only 2% of which are ever solved (Tameez, 2019). This led many Mexicans to become frustrated with Peña Nieto's government and increasingly desperate for an alternative; in 2017 his approval rating sank as low as 12% (Martin, 2017). Peña Nieto also belonged to the prominent party PRI, and this created a strong anti-establishment sentiment among Mexicans (Romero, 2018: 2). Obrador capitalised on the dissatisfaction by promising to rid the country of government corruption, similar to Donald Trump's 'drain the swamp' rhetoric (Romero, 2018: 1). Obrador matched it with a slogan of his own, often referring to corrupt elites as 'the power mafia' (CNN Expansión, 2011). His camp has even suggested rewriting the Mexican constitution, indicating the extent to which he is willing to go to uproot established norms (Romero, 2018: 4). In this regard, Obrador clearly displays populist

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tendencies with his opposition to the established status quo and political elites. He ran against the established party and promised to remove corrupt elites in government, gaining the support of the Mexican people.

Popular Support

With his promise to clamp down on corruption, Obrador also united various groups in Mexican society (Romero, 2018: 1). He achieved this by creating a coalition of parties with different ideologies under the Morena name (Romero, 2018: 1). This gave him access to supporters with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests, such as Marxists and Mexican big business leaders (Romero, 2018: 1). Part of the reason for this is Obrador's ambiguity in his political ideology. He appears to have leftist ideals, as seen in his plans to reform state owned energy company Pemex, rather than privatising it (Garcia, 2019). However, he has also made neoliberal, right-wing propositions like minimising taxes and creating an investor friendly economy (Eventon, 2018). It is likely that Obrador deliberately created this uncertainty about his ideology in order to gain support from many by offending none (Eventon, 2018). Taking a clear stance would alienate him from Mexicans who disagree with him, and instead Obrador's campaign made a conscious effort to unite the people. This can be seen in his campaign slogan *Juntos Haremos Historia*: Together We'll Make History (Romero, 2018: 1). The campaign won Obrador 30 million votes, easily making him the most popular candidate in the election. (Romero, 2018: 1). This firmly established Obrador as a figure with the support of the people, in keeping with the populist style.

Unorthodox Practices

Like other populists, Obrador has also acted in unorthodox ways. After his narrow defeat in the 2006 presidential election, Obrador disputed the results and declared himself the legitimate president of Mexico (Associated Press, 2015). He went as far as to hold an 'inauguration' in the presence of thousands of his supporters and appointed an alternate cabinet to undermine the elected president, Felipe Calderón (Associated Press, 2015). While this certainly was an inappropriate move, it happened over a decade before his presidency and cannot be used as evidence to declare Obrador as a populist in his current form because his approach has changed considerably since then. A more recent unorthodox move was absorbing smaller parties into Morena (Romero, 2018: 1). This is more consistent with the populist style because such coalitions are unusual in Mexican politics, especially between parties with different interests (Romero, 2018: 1). This also supports the claim that Obrador is a populist because combining groups with different interests was an attempt to appeal to as many people as possible. Obrador lacks the crude bluntness of other populists like the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, but he is clearly willing to make unprecedented political moves.

Oversimplifying Complex issues

An element of Obrador's style which is more consistent with other populist leaders is the way that he simplifies complex issues. Oversimplification is a key element of the populist style, especially in the digital media age (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 387). As stated above, Obrador's policies lack detail and he campaigned under a simplistic, vague slogan (Romero, 2018: 1). This drew comparisons to Trump's Make America Great Again campaign in 2016 (Stevenson, 2018). Obrador is also very active on social media, often tweeting multiple times in a day. Given that Twitter's 280-character limit, Obrador cannot include much nuance in his messages. This indicates that Obrador has a preference for oversimplifying issues online as well as in his public discourse much like other populist leaders.

Obrador's Non-Populist Attributes

While there are many ways that Obrador appears to be a populist, he also shows some characteristics that are inconsistent with the populist style. One of the marks of a populist leader is creating a sense of urgency about an imminent threat (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 391). Obrador has done this to a degree with government corruption, but he does not play up the threat as much as other populists might. Interestingly, even though Mexico has one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world, it was not a major emphasis in Obrador's campaign and in his presidency has even been accused of downplaying the issue (Sheridan, 2019). Another inconsistency in Obrador's style is that while it is unorthodox, it cannot be described as crude or impolite. During his campaign he promised to bring 'hugs

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not bullets', much more palatable language than is used by the likes of Duterte (Sheridan, 2019). Obrador has spoken out against corrupt government elites, calling them the 'power mafia', but he does not refer to them with the sharp vitriol that other leaders use (CNN Expansión, 2011). This is possibly because 2018 was Obrador's third attempt at the presidency and he did not need to resort to extreme tactics to keep the public's attention. Inconsistencies like these indicate that while Obrador's style is certainly reminiscent of the populist approach, he is more moderate in his approach. If the populist label is to be applied to Obrador, it must be with a few caveats.

Conclusion

Obrador's campaign and presidency have drawn attention because of his large following despite unclear policies. The vast support has caused many to call him a populist, but upon examining the evidence one might not be so quick to do so. Obrador does make use of unorthodox practices and criticises political elites, both elements of the populist style. He also oversimplifies issues, and some are hesitant to trust him because of his vague policies. However, Obrador does not play up threats to Mexican society, which is a key tactic of populist leaders. Also, despite being unorthodox, he does not use crude or distasteful language. The result is that Obrador perhaps could be called a populist because of his widespread support and vague policies, but to liken him to other populists like Trump or Duterte would be inaccurate. AMLO certainly is a man of the people, but his style may best be described as entry level populism. Obrador displays some populist tendencies, but he is by no means extreme.

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Date written: October 2019