A case study into the making and evolution of populist discourse
Examining Hugo Chávez’s discourse and its radicalisation through time

Cristina Espinal

Research Questions
Did the discourse of Hugo Chávez follow the traditional patterns of populist discourse? How did Chávez’s discourse evolve throughout his presidency?

Methodology
The analysis was anchored through a combination of both a quantitative analysis of textual data, in the form of word-lists (frequency meaning the number of occurrences of a word in a sample or corpus) and a qualitative approach, which explores the episodes in the literature that foregrounds the need for rhetorical inquiry into Chávez’s discourse by emphasizing how charismatic political power is derived from the leader’s effective speech. Consequently, this study aimed to evaluate the composition and evolution of his discourse throughout his presidency establishing a methodological framework in order to classify the discursive elements he utilised and their purpose. The study highlights that although many scholars are now familiar with Chávez’s radical leftism, many may be less aware of the early ideological content of his discourse and its radicalisation over time. Thus, in an attempt to overcome this deficit in the literature, it aims to prove the radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse throughout his presidency.

Findings

1. The four hypotheses were validated.
   - The length of episodes on Aló Presidente increased greatly.
   - Personalism pillar: identification with the pueblo
     - This pillar remained stable, while the polarisation and revolution pillars increased over time.
   - Polarisation pillar: antagonism and polarisation of the nation
     - There is a systematic increase in the frequency of each phase.
   - Revolution pillar: deepening his revolutionary agenda
     - From Phase I to Phase II the frequency more than doubled, with the average words per episode rising by 138%, validating that the revolution pillar would increase greatly.

2. Method Populism?

   Conceptualisation of populism as a discourse
   - Personalism pillar: the vital “us vs. them” axis, which seeks to remould the popular masses that the opposition is the enemy.
   - Polarisation pillar: antagonism and polarisation of the nation
   - Revolution pillar: aims to demonstrate that references to revolution not only permeate the language of Chávez but also intensity over time, with new stages always on the horizon.

3. Bolivarian revolution
   - The first subdivision aims to show the initial construction of Chávez’s national revolution whereby he unabashedly utilised the symbol of a national hero, Simón Bolívar, to legitimise his political trajectory.
   - The second subdivision aims to highlight the change in Chávez’s strategy as his agenda became more radical with the introduction of twenty-first century socialism, crystallising a revolutionary break with the past.

   “The new era will begin today as an idea, central force, basic, fundamental strategic line, deepening, extension and expansion of the Bolivarian Revolution, of the democratic revolution in Venezuelan life towards socialism” (Chávez, 2006)

   The substantial increase of the revolution pillar over time signals the radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse. This coincides with the fact that with the passing of each phase, after each confrontation, Chávez emerged stronger and more consolidated, and his hold over power more secure.

   Twenty-first century socialism
   - On the contrary, the second subdivision emerged in the third phase, with the stark increase in references to words like socialist and socialismo, which highlights the drastic radicalisation of Chávez’s discourse that coincided with the deepening of his revolutionary vision.

4. Analytical Model
Three pillars of populist discourse

   Personalism pillar: appealing to and identifying with al pueblo as a baseline and necessary condition. In Chávez’s discourse al pueblo represent the common people, those who have been marginalized, ignored, and exploited.

   Polarisation pillar: conceptualises the vital “us vs. them” axis, which seeks to remould the popular masses that the opposition is the enemy.

   Revolution pillar: aims to demonstrate that references to revolution not only permeate the language of Chávez but also intensity over time, with new stages always on the horizon.

   Phase I: The moderate stage, 1999-2000
   - Hypothesis 1: The three main pillars of populist discourse will appear in Chávez’s discourse.
   - Hypothesis 2: The personalism pillar will remain stable over time.
   - Hypothesis 3: The polarisation pillar will increase over time.
   - Phase II: Hypothesis 4: The revolution pillar will increase over time.

   Phase II: Opposition revolt and Chávez’s retaliation, 2006-2008
   - Phase III: The change in revolutionary agenda to twenty-first century socialism, 2006-2008
   - Phase IV: Second phase, after each confrontation, Chávez emerged stronger and more consolidated, and his hold over power more secure.

   Phase IV: Twenty-first century socialism
   - The second subdivision aims to highlight the change in Chávez’s strategy as his agenda became more radical with the introduction of twenty-first century socialism, crystallising a revolutionary break with the past.

   “The new era will begin today as an idea, central force, basic, fundamental strategic line, deepening, extension and expansion of the Bolivarian Revolution, of the democratic revolution in Venezuelan life towards socialism” (Chávez, 2006)

   Hypothesis 1: The three main pillars of populist discourse will appear in Chávez’s discourse.
   - Hypothesis 2: The personalism pillar will remain stable over time.
   - Hypothesis 3: The polarisation pillar will increase over time.
   - Hypothesis 4: The revolution pillar will increase over time.

   “You are not going to re-elect Chávez really, you are going to re-elect the people. Chávez is nothing but an instrument of the people” (Hugo Chávez, 2006)