



The promises and perils of populism for democratic policymaking: the case of Mexico

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Abstract

Much has been said theoretically about whether populism corrects the limitations of democracies, or instead damages their foundations. Yet we still know very little about how populist governments affect democratic policymaking in practice. Taking the classic policy cycle approach as a heuristic device, this article analyzes how populists influence agenda-setting, policy formulation and design, implementation, evaluation, and termination processes. Using a variety of sources, the article provides a qualitative in-depth analysis of the Mexican case during the first half of president Andrés-Manuel López-Obrador administration. The article shows that a populist government may fulfill some of its promises, but it ultimately materializes most of its perils, causing significant policy, institutional, and social damage. Populists introduce important distortions in each one of the policy stages and thus alter considerably the policymaking processes usually associated with democratic regimes. They employ a variety of strategies to limit the number of policy actors taking part in agenda-setting and evaluation exercises; formulate ineffective policy tools based on questionable design assumptions; develop personalistic implementation channels prone to patronage and clientelism; undermine the value of evidence-based analyses and discussions; and terminate institutions and programs on a discretionary basis. By exerting a rhetorical monopoly over the ‘will of the people,’ populists can follow policymaking patterns that significantly depart from the technical, rational, and pluralistic standards commonly associated with democratic policymaking. The article brings together debates on populism and policymaking, and studies a national case which has received limited scholarly attention, thus adding to both our theoretical and empirical contemporary understanding on this subject.

Keywords Populism · Democratic backsliding · Public policy · Policy cycle · Mexico · Democratic governance

The potential promises and perils of populist governments for democratic regimes have been widely discussed theoretically, but less so empirically. Much has been said about how populism corrects the limitations of ‘liberal democracies’ or damages their very

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foundations (Mény & Surel, 2002; Panizza, 2005; Mudde & Rovira, 2012, 2017; Mudde, 2021; Casullo, 2014; Müller, 2016, 2017; Rummens, 2017; Moffitt, 2020; Urbinati, 2020). The literature on democratic backsliding has documented how populist governments erode political institutions, electoral laws, constitutional principles, and individual rights (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021). More recently, Public Administration scholars have argued populists undermine bureaucratic institutions and principles (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021; Moynihan & Roberts, 2021a, 2021b; Moynihan, 2022a, 2022b; Peci, 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2019, 2020; Rockman, 2019; Stoker, 2019).

However, the study of whether and how populist governments affect democratic policymaking processes remains scarce. There are works that focus on the effects of populist policies on the economy and some policy indicators (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990, 2007; Funke et al., 2020; Peters, 2022). Similarly, some studies have provided information about the way populists influence certain policy areas (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013; Batory & Svensson, 2019; Caiani & Graziano, 2022). Some authors suggest populism is changing the way evidence is used in the making of policies (Borins, 2018; Head & Banerjee, 2020). With the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars argue populist governments ‘mishandled’ the crisis (Bayerlain et al., 2021; Lasco, 2020; Rentería & Arellano-Gault, 2021). Despite these contributions, we still lack a good understanding regarding how populists, once in government, affect policymaking patterns.

Studying the influence of populists in policymaking is relevant for policy studies for at least three reasons. First, the topic cuts across key normative and theoretical issues which have been discussed since Harold Lasswell’s times (Farr et al., 2006; Laswell, 1993; Torgerson, 2017). For instance, what is the role ‘policy sciences’ should play regarding the choice of (and support for) a given type of political system (e.g., democracies vs. autocracies). Second, the public policy literature has been traditionally grounded in what Howlett (2022) recently labeled a ‘Panglossian’ view: one that underlines the relevance of evidence, value-free analyses, technical prowess, policy effectiveness, and the like (Bundi & Trein, 2022; Peters et al., 2018). Whether these features hold true under populist regimes remains an open question. Third and last, as the number of populist governments increases around the world (Moffitt, 2020; Oswald, 2021), so does the amount of policy processes and government decisions made under conditions that differ from those found in most policy texts. Indeed, we still know very little about how these changing political circumstances affect the lives of millions of people.

Taking the classic policy stages approach as an analytical point of departure, the article discusses how populists affect agenda-setting, policy formulation and design, implementation, evaluation, and termination. The policy cycle metaphor has been long criticized for providing a simplistic perspective (e.g., ‘textbook approach’; Sabatier, 2007) about a process that is extremely complex (Cairney et al., 2019; Weible & Sabatier, 2018). However, it remains widely used as a heuristic, both in general policy discussions (Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Tosun & Knill, 2020; Wu et al., 2017) and in a variety of research areas (e.g., artificial intelligence: Valle-Cruz et al., 2020; relationships between bureaucrats and politicians: Alford et al., 2017). Indeed, as the article shows, looking at the policy stages provides a useful glimpse of populists in action. Moreover, given the novelty of this research subject, the policy stages heuristic provides a research entry point as good as any other.

The article studies the case of Mexico during the first three years of Andrés Manuel López-Obrador’s administration, a president commonly portrayed as a ‘populist’ (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Méndez et al., 2021; Rentería & Arellano, 2021; Solorio et al., 2021). The Mexican experience is interesting for a variety of theoretical and substantive reasons

(Toshkov, 2016). At one level, it seems to be a ‘typical’ case (Gerring, 2007), given its similarities with other contemporary populist governments. Its analysis thus provides an opportunity to test the still limited theoretical insights from previous literature. At the same time, Mexico’s populist regime has not been as thoroughly studied as other prominent cases such as Hungary, Venezuela, or the recent cases of the USA under Donald Trump and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro. Therefore, its analysis is relevant for empirical reasons, as well as for broadening our ‘comparative conversation’ (Page, 1995) on the subject. Indeed, the Mexican case provides a useful setting for generating new hypotheses and insights (Widner et al., 2022) about how populists influence policymaking processes.

The article is part of a broader research project on how populism affects bureaucratic institutions and public policies (see Dussauge-Laguna, 2021, 2022; Dussauge-Laguna & Aguilar, 2021). It is mainly based on presidential statements, official documents, and secondary sources (e.g., media articles, policy expert analyses) covering the first three years of the López-Obrador administration. In contrast to recent studies that focus on specific policy sectors (e.g., health or education; Flores-Crespo & García, 2021; Guevara, 2022; Tello, 2022), this article provides several brief examples from a variety of policy areas. This is useful to illustrate policymaking patterns that cut across policy areas, and thus build theoretical insights about the phenomenon under study (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Toshkov, 2016; Widner et al., 2022).

The article argues that a populist government introduces significant distortions in each one of the policy stages, and thus alters considerably the policymaking processes usually associated with democratic regimes. Populists claim to have a unique understanding of ‘the people’s will’ and present themselves as the only true representatives of ‘the people’ (Urbinati, 2020; Olivas, 2021; Müller, 2016). This shields them from any criticisms and allows them to develop a series of policymaking strategies that differ, significantly and systematically, from the technical rationality, evidence-informed, and pluralistic standards commonly associated with policymaking in democratic regimes. Along the way, populists fulfill some of their promises. Yet, in the end, they also materialize many of the perils the literature has long discussed. Ultimately, the case of Mexico shows that populist policymaking patterns are not only distinct from democratic policymaking ones, but also lead to faulty public policies and negative social outcomes.

Populism, democratic governance, and policymaking

The relationship between populism and democratic governance has been long debated, but our knowledge about how populist governments affect policymaking remains limited. Scholars of populism have usually discussed its perils and promises from a theoretical perspective. It is only recently, when populists have reached more government positions, that scholars are assessing the effects populist governing styles have on political and bureaucratic institutions. Moreover, analyses have not really focused on how populist governments may affect public authorities’ decisions when trying to solve public problems or pursue social objectives.

The literature on populism provides several ideas about how the latter affects democratic regimes, but the debate remains inconclusive (Mény & Surel, 2000; Panizza, 2005; Casullo, 2014; Müller, 2016, 2017; De la Torre, 2017; Urbinati, 2020; Moffitt, 2020). For instance, Mudde and Rovira (2017:84) suggest, ‘populism can play both a positive and a negative role for liberal democracy.’ Indeed, some argue populism may be good for a

democracy for various reasons. In times of low trust in government and growing distance between citizens and traditional political parties, populists may help bring back to politics formerly excluded social groups (de la Torre, 2017). Populists are also seen as a potential counterweight to the elitist forces that usually control politics. Some even argue populists improve democratic responsiveness by advancing and implementing policies for long-ignored communities (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Thus, the rise of populism can sometimes be seen less as a symptom of a ‘*malaise démocratique*’ (Mény & Surel, 2000:21), than as ‘a wholesome corrective’ (Rummens, 2017:555). In the face of authoritarian regimes, populists may even become a democratizing force (Moffitt, 2020:108).

On the other hand, there have been several criticisms about the perils that populism poses to a democracy (Müller, 2016, 2017; Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2020). Some authors doubt a political leader can rightfully speak ‘in the name of the people,’ adopt a morally superior attitude against political opponents, and then justify political and government decisions (Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2020). Others argue populists seek to delegitimize political opponents (Olivas, 2021). As a result, democratic values such as pluralism and freedom of expression suffer under populist regimes (Rummens, 2017). Furthermore, the majoritarian logic of populists undermines ‘checks and balances,’ as well as political institutions established to protect minority rights (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Some populists may even try to change the ‘rules of the game’ to remain in power (Müller, 2017; Urbinati, 2020).

Discussions have taken a different turn under recent ‘democratic backsliding’ studies (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). While not always explicit, the link between populism and democratic backsliding is present because it is populist leaders who lead the weakening of democratic institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bauer et al., 2021; Müller, 2016). This literature has shown the risks posed by populist governments are real. While some populist governments have brought with them an expansion of voting rights and participation from previously excluded minorities (Casullo, 2014; Rovira et al., 2017), they have also eroded democratic regimes. The governments of Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, and Viktor Orbán have used ‘the people’ symbolically to justify illegal policies, pursue political polarization, and demonize political opponents. Once in government, their policies have undermined the separation of powers and the legitimacy of government institutions that opposed them. They have also attacked the media, civil society organizations, the ‘deep state,’ and minority groups (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013). Populist governments have also engaged in ‘discriminatory legalism’ (e.g., the use of the law to protect allies while punishing enemies; Müller, 2016).

A third body of recent studies has investigated how populist governments affect bureaucratic institutions. Bauer and colleagues (2021) have recently provided an international account on how backsliding (triggered by populist governments) damaged bureaucratic institutions in countries as diverse as Italy, Venezuela, or Poland. They argue populist governments centralize powers around the executive leader; reassign institutional priorities and resources on a discretionary basis; increase patronage in public appointments; and undermine administrative principles (e.g., accountability). Bauer and Becker (2020) and Peters and Pierre (2019, 2020) have further argued populists are less worried about governing effectively than about capturing, sabotaging, sidelining, or dismantling bureaucratic institutions. Others have shown populist governments affect public sector innovation (Borins, 2018) and governance arrangements (e.g., network-based or public–private collaborations; Stoker, 2019). A growing number of studies show the damage caused by populist governments on the administrative infrastructure of countries as varied as the USA

(Goodsell, 2019; Moynihan & Roberts, 2021a, 2021b; Moynihan, 2022a, 2022b; Rockman, 2019), Hungary (Batory & Svensson, 2019; Hajnal, 2021; Hajnal & Boda, 2021), or Brazil (Guedes-Neto & Peters, 2021; Peci, 2021).

Finally, a few works have discussed the relationship between populism and policymaking. Bartha and colleagues (2020) have proposed an ‘ideal type’ of ‘populism in policymaking.’ They describe a regime that, among other features, reflects ‘majoritarian preferences’ and ‘hostility against unpopular minorities’; challenges ‘mainstream policy paradigms’; circumvents established institutions and downplays veto players; limits ‘the participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors’; establishes ‘direct communication with the electorate’; and recurs to a ‘tabloid, highly emotional communication style’ and ‘Manichean discourses.’ Focused on what they called ‘macroeconomic populism’ in Latin American countries, Dornbusch and Edwards (1990, 2007) have argued populist policymaking tends to fail. Similarly, Funke and his colleagues (2020) have found populist governments produce lower economic growth and have deleterious effects on democratic institutions. Peters (2022) has recently shown that subnational populist governments in the USA performed worse than non-populist governments on indicators such as education attainment, infant mortality, economic inequality or growth. Lastly, studies on government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have illustrated how populist leaders ‘mishandled’ the crisis (Bayerlein et al., 2021; Lasco, 2020; Rentería & Arellano, 2021).

In addition, there are some scattered mentions in the literature about how populist governments influence specific stages of the policy process. Regarding the agenda-setting process, Müller (2016:35) argues that populists sustain the ‘idea that leaders represent the ‘true will’ of the people and hence they know which policies to advance.’ Moffit (2020:54) also states that, for populists, those outside ‘the people’ are beneath contempt,’ which means they cannot legitimately contribute to the public/government agenda. Some authors have flagged populists use social media and other communication mechanisms (e.g., radio or TV programs) to bypass traditional media outlets, establish an ‘unmediated’ communication with citizens, and share their policies more ‘directly’ (Levitt & Ziblatt, 2018; Goodsell, 2019). In terms of policy formulation, Borins (2018:1862) argues that populists usually do not collect information on what they see as ‘non-priorities,’ regardless of how important the topics may be. Batory and Svensson (2019) have demonstrated that a populist government can distort public consultations to produce whatever information they want. Stoker (2019:11) has noted populists do not tend to ‘respect core features of politics,’ such as ‘the complexities of implementation.’ Scholars have also flagged that populists are critical of external implementing actors, such as civil society organizations or private actors (Hajnal, 2021; Stoker, 2019). At the same time, they may favor the creation of ‘clientelar networks’ to maintain a grip on implementation and build political support (De la Torre, 2017). Scholars have also shown populist governments systematically underplay the role of expertise and scientific evidence in policy design and evaluation activities (Borins, 2018; Head & Banerjee, 2020; Stoker, 2019). Indeed, Goodsell (2019:880) states populist governments produce ‘policies not thought out.’ Lastly, some authors have noted populist policymakers may decide to terminate policies and programs without much explanation. For instance, Borins (2018:1862) discusses how Trump’s first budget included ‘deep cuts to several key departments [...], as well as the termination of a large number of autonomous agencies and programmes and specific programmes within departments.’

Table 1 summarizes the features the literature links to what could be labeled a ‘populist style’ of policymaking.

Table 1 Expectations about populist policymaking patterns

Policy stages	Expectations
Agenda-setting	Involvement of previously excluded actors, but potential exclusion of 'illegitimate' actors Agenda items aligned with the populist leader's priorities 'Unmediated' communication with the public
Policy formulation and design	Information about 'non-priorities' usually ignored Use of policy consultations, albeit on a biased form
Implementation	Implementation complexities ignored Discretionary patterns of implementation Fewer non-governmental actors involved Use of 'clientelar networks'
Evaluation	Limited role for expertise Scientific evidence regularly sidelined
Termination	More frequent than before Discretionary
General features	Concern about majoritarian preferences, but disregard for minorities New policies to advance excluded sectors' interests More participatory policymaking style 'Manichean' discourse Poor policy outputs and outcomes, particularly in the long term 'Discriminatory legalism' and 'colonization of the state' 'Policies not thought out'

How do populist policymaking features compare to those found in a democracy? There is, of course, a wide variety of policymaking characteristics in each democratic setting, which are conditioned by national administrative traditions, political systems, policy styles, etc. Despite these differences across nations, the literature does point at some commonalities in policymaking processes under democratic regimes (Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Knill & Tosun, 2020; Mintrom, 2012; Peters et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2017). First, policymaking in a democracy assumes a plurality of actors and thus a variety of interests, particularly in (but not limited to) agenda-setting processes. Because of each country's empirical features, every policy actor's power, resources, and access to decision-making centers will vary. Yet, a priori, all actors' legitimacy to participate in policy decisions is not disputed. Second, modern democracies assume that public decisions will be made (and policies will be subsequently designed) with the aid of tools that are conducive to producing logic, efficient, effective, value for money, and/or evidence-informed actions (e.g., logic frameworks, cost–benefit analysis, forecasting, environmental/regulatory impact analyses, systematic reviews, experiments, benchmarks). Third, policymaking processes in a democracy, particularly implementation activities and bureaucratic exchanges, are bound by impartial laws, administrative procedures, and regulations, which can only be ignored or changed through established institutional mechanisms, and not by personal or partisan reasons. Discretionary decisions do happen, but they are supposed to be grounded in administrative or policy needs, and not as a result of clientelism or political caprice. Fourth, on top of using analytical tools, governments in a democracy are also required to provide reasons and give accounts (grounded on technical assessments, objective data, and institutional channels) to the public about the policies they make and the results they get. External actors have an active participation in assessing government decisions and commenting on their relative level of success. Last but not least, policy termination is usually hard to come by in

democratic regimes (Geva-May, 2004). Given the stickiness of policy arrangements, the political costs of cutting benefits, and the capacity of interest groups to detain (or at least influence) government decisions, policy inertia, succession, accumulation, or change are more common outcomes (Adam et al., 2019; Hogwood & Peters, 1982; Knill & Tosun, 2020; Rose, 1990).

Table 2 synthesizes the former ideas to show some expected features of the policy cycle in a democratic setting.

The previous discussion provides a theoretical point of departure to think about how a populist government may change (or not) policymaking patterns in contrast to the ‘normal’ patterns one could expect to see in a democracy. The following section will now discuss the recent Mexican experience and will try to generate some hypotheses. Afterward, the paper will offer a broader discussion about the implications of the case considering the recent international experience.

Policymaking under a populist government: the case of Mexico

This section analyzes the contemporary experience of Mexico, a country currently governed by Andrés Manuel López-Obrador (2018–2024). In contrast to other historical populist experiences in Latin America (Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador), or to contemporary ones (Hungary, the USA, Brazil), Mexico has not been widely discussed in the academic literature (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Bruhn, 2013). This makes it a particularly interesting case for broadening our comparative conversations, as it forms part of the broader universe of populist experiences, while at the same time it provides an opportunity to develop new hypotheses about how populist leaders govern.

The following description and analysis of the Mexican case is mainly based on a revision of official documents (e.g., evaluation and audit reports, institutional reports and statements), secondary sources (e.g., academic literature and analytical essays from academics

Table 2 Features of democratic policymaking processes

Dimensions	Features
Agenda-setting	A priori, any actor interested in a subject or (potentially) affected by a policy can get involved Influence varies due to resources, access, etc.
Policy formulation and design	A variety of analytical tools are used (e.g., logic frameworks, cost–benefit analysis, forecasting, environmental/regulatory impact analyses, systematic reviews, experiments, benchmarks) Policy efficiency/effectiveness, value for money, causality will be primary concerns
Policy implementation	Policy decisions are bound by the rule of law Changes to the legal framework need to follow established procedures Discretionary decisions are possible, albeit because of policy needs and not caprice
Policy evaluation	Arguments, reasons, evidence, accounts about the adequacy of policies are provided Accountability and monitoring/evaluation mechanisms are institutionalized
Policy termination	Difficult to achieve Policy changes as most likely outcome

and policy experts, which are commonly produced and used in public debates in Mexico), and presidential statements (e.g., books written by López-Obrador himself, presidential speeches, and news articles which comment and reproduce verbatim the president's words). The latter is a particularly relevant source given López-Obrador's governing style, which makes a prominent use of daily press conferences in which he talks about public issues, gives instructions to his cabinet members, elaborates on his plans or policy decisions, and engages in political discussions (see Espino, 2021; Estrada, 2022). Moreover, these sources are very useful given the 'moving target' nature of the phenomenon under study.

The article draws examples from several policy areas. Some recent analysis on the Mexican experience have studied particular policy fields or topics, such as health, education, the management of the pandemic, or the provision of drugs and medicines (e.g., Flores-Crespo & García, 2021; Guevara, 2022; Institute for Global Health Sciences, 2021; Tello, 2022; Ximénez-Fyvie, 2021). Other collective volumes have studied a variety of chosen policy topics from López-Obrador's administration (Becerra & Woldenberg, 2020; Heredia & Gómez, 2021). This article follows a slightly different, more generalist perspective, following what Page (1990, 1995) calls a 'Machiavellian' style of analysis, that is to choose some illustrations to inductively explain a broader point about policy patterns. This mode of analysis is in line with the way other scholars have recently studied the effects of populist governments on public policies and administrations in Hungary (Hajnal, 2021), the USA (Moynihan, 2022b), and Brazil (Peci, 2021). Such a strategy is also useful to both provide an interpretation of the Mexican case, while building some broader hypotheses about the way populist governments influence policymaking (George & Benett, 2005; Gerding, 2007; Widner et al., 2022).

The period covered in the analysis is from 2018 (including some months prior to López-Obrador's inauguration) to the middle of 2022 (when this manuscript was completed). The study forms part of a broader project which uses the current Mexican experience to better understand how populists in government affect the functioning of public institutions and policies (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021, 2022; Dussauge-Laguna & Aguilar, 2021).

López-Obrador as a populist leader

In his third attempt to win the presidency (2006 and 2012), López-Obrador won the 2018 national elections with a significant margin (53.19%, more than double the second place, with 22.27%). His political party, *MORENA* (*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*), also won most seats in both the chamber of deputies and the senate. This majority was further extended with the support of allied political parties. Therefore, in addition to the political legitimacy derived from his electoral triumph, during the first half of his administration (2018–2021) López-Obrador enjoyed a qualified majority to pass legal and constitutional changes. López-Obrador's popularity has also remained highly positive throughout his government. While his approval levels are like those of former presidents (Moreno, 2022), López-Obrador has skillfully used information from public polls to build a narrative which paints his policy proposals and actions as a reflection of the 'people's will.' He has also ably separated his personal popularity from the actual results of his government's policies (Castro, 2022; Loeza, 2022).

López-Obrador has been commonly portrayed as a textbook populist politician by the media and scholars alike (Espino, 2021; Méndez et al., 2021; Rentería & Arellano, 2021; Solorio et al., 2021). During his long career, particularly since he was Mexico City's mayor in 2000–2006 (Bruhn, 2013), López-Obrador has used a polarizing rhetoric which divides

between *el pueblo* ('the people') and other political actors (e.g., the elites, opposition parties, or specific social groups; see his own books: López-Obrador, 2019c, 2021). He has portrayed himself as the only political leader who listens to the people and knows what the latter needs (Heredia & Gómez, 2021). In addition, his rhetoric and policy proposals are full of moral undertones (e.g., one of his recent books is titled *Hacia una economía moral*, or *Toward a Moral Economy*; López-Obrador, 2019c; Díaz-Cayeros, 2021). He has also maintained an ambiguous attitude regarding the rule of the law and has often stated justice is even more important than legality (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; López-Ayllón et al., 2020).

Taking advantage of his political legitimacy (as well as the poor reputation and significant weaknesses that opposition parties currently face), López-Obrador has employed his populist rhetoric to publicly justify and legitimize several actions and reforms which many authors think are triggering a democratic backsliding process in Mexico (Becerra & Woldenberg, 2020; Peters & Somuano, 2021; Sánchez, 2020; Ugalde, 2022). He has extended his control over the legislative and has influenced some key and highly political decisions in the judiciary (e.g., the approval of controversial public consultations). He has publicly attacked constitutional autonomous agencies and has used his legislative majority to cut their budgets. He has appointed political loyalists in leadership positions in semiautonomous regulatory agencies and has stalled the appointment processes of board members in independent regulators (e.g., the Federal Economic Competition Commission and the Federal Telecommunications Institute). Last but not least, he is currently pursuing an electoral reform which could compromise the independence of electoral institutions.

Apart from López-Obrador's effects on political and bureaucratic institutions, how does his populist governing style influence policymaking patterns? The following sections discuss each of the policy stages and study the extent to which his populist government has fulfilled populism's promises, or instead has materialized its perils.

Agenda-setting

López-Obrador has tried to link what he sees as 'the people's will' with his own government's agenda. From a rhetorical point of view, *el pueblo* ('the people') is the most frequently used term in the president's daily morning press conferences (Espino, 2021; Estrada, 2022; Leal, 2021). Indeed, almost any official communication (from legal initiatives to tweets) refers to 'the people.' Second, López-Obrador's agenda (as represented by official documents produced by him or his office) does seem to address policy topics in line with his concerns regarding the poor, the needy, and other social groups usually portrayed by López-Obrador as 'the people' (Díaz-Cayeros, 2021; López-Obrador, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021). For instance, the document *100 compromisos* (*100 commitments*) produced during his electoral campaign and basis of his government program, discusses the need to give 'special attention to the indigenous people'; provide scholarships to 'students from economically disadvantaged families' and to 'young people, in poverty conditions, who enter or study university'; and increase 'pension amounts for the elderly' (López-Obrador, 2019b). Similarly, the government's *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019–2024* (*National Development Plan 2019–2024*; DOF, 2019) announces the provision of subsidies and financial support for low-income groups; a variety of social programs (e.g., *Sembrando Vida*, *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*; see more on this below); and infrastructure megaprojects (e.g., a so-called Maya train for the southeast region, a new oil refinery) for underdeveloped areas of Mexico.

On the other hand, López-Obrador's policymaking style has also raised important challenges to basic features of democratic agenda-setting processes. A first strategy he has put in place is that of **systematically biasing the public agenda**, so that all attention is placed on his own policy priorities. Before entering office, López-Obrador organized a highly disputed referendum on ten topics which he considered a priority for his government (López-Obrador, 2018). The list included his big infrastructure projects and social programs. With an unsurprising majority of 'Yes' (89.9% out of about less than 1 million votes out of 90 million potential voters), the president used the results to publicly underline the legitimacy of his agenda. Since then, most of his public speeches and morning pressers have focused on items related to that initial list (Estrada, 2022). Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, López-Obrador quickly passed overall responsibility on the subject to a senior official and thus mostly avoided the topic during his public appearances (Peci et al., 2022). López-Obrador's focus on his own agenda has been so tight that even relevant issues, such as the need to provide emergency financial support to families and small business during the pandemic, have been ignored (Cejudo et al., 2021; Chertorivski, 2020; Díaz-Cayeros, 2021). Other top public concerns registered in national representative surveys run by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (INEGI, or National Institute of Statistics and Geography; INEGI, 2020), such as environmental pollution or deficient hospital attention, have not received much attention from the president.

A second and complementary strategy the president has used (very much in line with Bachrach and Baratz's conception of power; see Birkland, 2017) has been **neglecting the social relevance of certain policy topics**, and thus blocking the flow of public and institutional attention (and thereafter resources) toward them. There are several examples of this (Estrada, 2022). Since the beginning of his mandate, there have been complaints by several social groups about the lack of medicines in public hospitals, including those for treating children with cancer (Tello, 2022). Despite the availability of public information, personal testimonies, and several reports documenting the issue (Impunidad Cero, 2021; Suárez, 2021), the president has systematically sidelined the relevance of the subject. In fact, it was not until the third year of his administration that he timidly admitted the *desabasto de medicinas* (undersupply of drugs) was a real issue (Cullell, 2021). López-Obrador has acted in a similar way on other topics, such as the significant increase during his term in the number of massacres (Mendiola, 2021) or femicides (Díaz, 2020).

Lastly, another strategy pursued by López-Obrador has been that of **delegitimizing policy actors**. The president has often attacked political actors, social groups, academic institutions, and even public officials, aiming to undermine their legitimacy to participate in the public sphere and their right to push for their own issues to be included in the government's agenda. During his daily *conferencias mañaneras* (morning pressers; Espino, 2021; Estrada, 2022), López-Obrador has stigmatized civil society organizations which conduct anti-corruption research ('they receive international funding from USAID'; El Financiero, 2021); academics and scientists who have protested against government intervention in their institutions or have asked for stronger support for scientific programs ('not all of them can be trusted'; Redacción Animal Político, 2020); and feminist groups who have asked for more security and better policies for women ('they are manipulated by conservative groups'; Forbes, 2021).

Policy formulation and design

López-Obrador has tried to legitimize the formulation of his government policies in two ways: referring to his profound understanding of ‘the people’s needs’ (due to his long political career); and suggesting his policy decisions have been clearly supported by ‘the people’ (Espino, 2021; Heredia & Gómez, 2021; López-Obrador, 2019c, 2021). Ad hoc public consultations, such as the one implemented for canceling Mexico City’s new international airport project and the one about the president’s priority projects (implemented in October and November 2018, respectively) have been used to show the president’s concern about ‘listening to the people,’ as well as the latter’s trust on him and his policy decisions. Apart from these efforts to establish a symbolic link between ‘the people’ and his administration’s policies, some of López-Obrador’s programs do address the needs of vulnerable social groups and underdeveloped regions. The program *Sembrando Vida* provides subsidies to farmers so that they focus on reforestation activities (Gobierno de México, 2020). The program *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* supports paid apprenticeships for young people without education or a job (Gobierno de México, 2021). Similarly, the Maya train (located in the Yucatán Peninsula; <https://www.trenmaya.gob.mx/>) and the Dos Bocas oil refinery (in the state of Tabasco; <https://dosbocas.energia.gob.mx/>) have been planned as projects which may trigger development in poorer regions of the country.

On the other hand, López-Obrador’s approach to policy formulation and design also seems to go against common principles of democratic policymaking. Many of his policy initiatives are based on an ‘*ambiguous legality*’ *modus operandi*. For instance, the two public consultations mentioned above took place before López-Obrador was sworn into office. They were organized by his political supporters and did not follow the procedures established on the public consultation law (Woldenberg, 2018). In the case of Mexico City airport’s cancelation, López-Obrador’s government even had to negotiate monetary settlements with investors to avoid future legal conflicts (Auditoría Superior de la Federación, 2021). Similarly, the president’s big infrastructure projects have faced criticisms and legal challenges from environmental activists and social organizations (and resignations from public servants) because proper environmental impact assessments and permits are missing (El Universal, 2019; Reforma, 2022). Indeed, the construction of the Maya train has been recently suspended by a federal judge for those same reasons (De Miguel, 2022). Another example is that of López-Obrador’s energy policy reforms, designed to favor state-owned enterprises. According to the *Comisión Federal de Competencia Económica (COFECE*, or Federal Economic Competition Commission), these initiatives are both anticompetitive and unconstitutional (COFECE, 2021). After a highly divisive vote, the Supreme Court judges could not fully agree on declaring the constitutionality of the president’s new electricity law, thus leaving the task of solving future legal challenges to lower courts on a case-by-case basis (Cullel, 2022a).

A second feature of López-Obrador’s policy formulation style has been the *making of personalistic and potentially clientelist policies*. Instead of developing better public service infrastructure or building partnerships with the private and social sectors, López-Obrador has introduced public programs that establish a direct link between his government and ‘the people,’ with no *intermediarios* (‘brokers’; see López-Obrador, 2019c; Hernández, 2020a; Jaramillo, 2021). Therefore, direct, unconditional, cash transfers have been the main policy tool to help elderly people, groups in extreme poverty, and elementary/middle school students enrolled in the public education system. Similarly, cash subsidies have been provided as incentive for farmers to plant trees (*Sembrando Vida*) and unemployed

young people (*Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*). Many of the transfers are commonly associated with López-Obrador in public speeches and electoral campaigns, with some people even calling them ‘AMLO’s scholarships’ (Casar, 2019).

A final strategy that could be observed in López-Obrador’s policy formulation style is that of *advancing ill-designed hunch-based policies*, as opposed to evidence-informed ones (Ureste et al., 2021). Studies from public institutions, such as the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política Social (CONEVAL*, or National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy) have flagged the deficient design of López-Obrador’s insignia initiatives, such as the *Becas Benito Juárez* (Gobierno de México, 2022) and the other programs mentioned above. The policy design assessments have flagged the lack of clear causal chains between tools, procedures, and policy objectives; unclear target populations; absence of baselines and performance indicators (CONEVAL, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Several media reports have similarly uncovered negative social outcomes in *Sembrando Vida* (farmers apparently deforest their fields to then ask for public subsidies to plant trees; Sanders, 2021), and *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* (there has been alleged corruption, inadequate training activities, and political involvement of young apprentices; Roldán, 2021). More broadly, academics and think tanks have pointed at the regressive nature of López-Obrador’s cash transfer programs: they are not adequately targeting poorer populations and are increasing social inequalities (Jaime, 2022; Jaramillo, 2021, 2022).

Implementation

In line with his policy formulation and design strategies, president López-Obrador has aimed to build a centralized model of implementation that shows him in control, while at the same time reinforces the linkage between his persona and ‘the people.’ Centralization has been pursued through various tools. In the daily *conferencias matutinas*, the president gives orders, delineates policies, and coordinates his cabinet’s activities in presence of the media, showing that he is in charge of policy delivery (Espino, 2021; Estrada, 2022). Less publicly but equally relevant has been the centralization of budgetary decisions, including the allocation of funds across federal institutions, budgetary cuts, and the redistribution of funds across policy sectors, all of which should in principle be decided by the chamber of deputies, but are currently controlled by the president and his legislative majority (Núñez, 2021). Centralization has been similarly pursued in relationships with state governments, for which a new structure of 32 *súperdelegados* (‘super delegates’) was established and reports directly to the president’s office (Redacción Animal Político, 2018).

However, other implementation strategies pursued by López-Obrador have run against what one would expect in democratic environments. A first one has been *performative implementation*, or how the president repeatedly states in public (e.g., in his press conferences) that him and his government are doing everything they can to address a public problem, while in reality public action on the subject is rather limited or deficient. The clearest example of this has been corruption control. López-Obrador’s political campaign was built on criticizing the corruption of previous governments. Indeed, ‘corruption’ is the second most used term during his *conferencias matutinas* (Estrada, 2022). However, his administration has not developed an effective anti-corruption strategy (Peschard, 2020). In fact, López-Obrador’s government has undermined the existing anti-corruption system (Loreto, 2021). At the same time, corruption perceptions (Transparencia Mexicana, 2022) and experiences (as measured by the National Statistics Agency; INEGI, 2022) have

remained at the levels of Peña Nieto's administration, while corruption scandals in López-Obrador's entourage have become frequent (Estrada, 2021; Rubí, 2022). Another example can be found in the federal government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Publicly, the president built a narrative about having everything under control (Peci et al., 2022). Yet Mexico has had one of the world's highest rates of Covid-19 deaths and excess mortality levels (see Our World in Data). This has been clearly due to the government's poor crisis response (Ximénez-Fyvie, 2020; Institute for Global Health Sciences, 2021; Chertorivski, 2020; Ponce de León & Rodríguez, 2021).

A second strategy often used by the president is that of *symbolic delivery*, which is presenting an unfinished project as completed. A good example of this is the inauguration of the *Aeropuerto Internacional Felipe Ángeles (AIFA)*, or Felipe Ángeles International Airport). After canceling Mexico City's new international airport project, López-Obrador said he would build a cheaper and better one on the grounds of the military airport in Santa Lucía. As promised, the *AIFA* was inaugurated on March 21, 2022, and a government sponsored documentary introduced it as an *obra del pueblo* ('artcraft by the people'; Garlem, 2022). However, essential components of this megaproject (such as transport connections to Mexico City) are yet to be built. There are no international flights (except for some charters and occasional flights from Venezuela), and no international airline plans to use the *AIFA* soon. Furthermore, the *AIFA* will never reach the canceled airport's projected capacity; the feasibility of having simultaneous operations with Mexico City's old airport is disputed; and its true construction costs are probably much higher than promised (Auditoría Superior de la Federación, 2021; Cullell, 2022b; Van Bedolla, 2021). A similar example is the oil refinery in Dos Bocas, Tabasco, which was inaugurated on July, 2, 2022 (Presidencia de la República, 2022). However, per the president's own admission, the refinery will not be operational until 2023.

A third strategy López-Obrador has pursued is *using parallel administrative structures*, that is organizations that either were not originally part of the government apparatus, or have very different institutional missions, to bypass existing administrative channels and exert control more directly. The *Servidores de la Nación* is a good example of this (Hernández, 2019). Initially created as a group to promote voting for López-Obrador in the 2018 elections, its members now perform a variety of public functions, particularly in the implementation of social programs (e.g., collecting information from beneficiaries, delivering funds, etc.). Despite their functions, the *Servidores de la Nación* work in coordination with the office of the president and not the ministry of social affairs (*Secretaría de Bienestar*). Another example can be found in the growing militarization of civilian responsibilities (Castañeda & Alvarado, 2021; Flores, 2020; Zepeda, 2021). López-Obrador has assigned an increasing number of projects, tasks, and positions to the army and the navy, including control over ports; the construction and management of the *AIFA* and the Maya train (including use of all profits); and responsibility over the newly established *Guardia Nacional* (a body of 100,000 public security forces which substituted the federal police; Peralta, 2021).

Last but not least, López-Obrador has furthered implementation *making use of extensive networks of loyalists*. As the president has declared, he prefers personnel that shows 'blind loyalty' to the *cuarta transformación's* ('fourth transformation') political project (López, 2019c; Morales, 2020). The *Servidores de la Nación* are a good example of this, but so are the *súperdelegados* that represent his government in each state and are accountable to him (Hernández, 2019; Monroy, 2020). Patronage has been used (as expected) in high level positions across the federal bureaucracy, but

several media reports have also shown its regular use within the structure of the federal civil service system. Moreover, the use of loyalists has been extended to leadership positions in semi-independent regulatory agencies in the energy sector (a priority area for the president Dussauge-Laguna & Aguilar, 2021; López-Obrador, 2021), as well as in public research institutes (where scientific communities have been highly critical of the government's policies).

Evaluation

López-Obrador has followed a clearly populist approach to evaluation, which is based on the frequent use of public meetings to present his government's results to 'the people.' Apart from the annual state of the union addresses to the congress, the president delivers to 'the people' quarterly reports and yearly *informes* (reports, to commemorate his 2018 electoral triumph). All of these combine political propaganda and a description of commitments he has fulfilled. These include actions (e.g., 'the rehabilitation of tarmacs in Mexico City's airport has begun'), broad statements (e.g., 'neither torture nor any other human rights violation will be tolerated'), performance indicators (e.g., '7,500,000 elderly people [...] have received their pensions'), or alleged accomplishments (e.g., 'corruption is no longer tolerated nor allowed'; López-Obrador, 2019a). As in the case of policy design processes, López-Obrador seems to favor an approach to evaluation that is unmediated, direct to 'the people.'

In addition, the president has followed some peculiar strategies, such as the use of an '*alternative facts model of evaluation*', in clear contrast to an evidence-informed one. When López-Obrador has been questioned by reporters or academics about the results or costs of his government's policies (e.g., employment levels, public security figures, the new airport's expenses), he usually responds that he has 'other data' (Arista, 2021; Espino, 2021; Garduño & Jiménez, 2021). This happens even when questions and criticisms are grounded on official data from public agencies, such as the National Statistics Agency (*INEGI*), the *CONVAL*, or federal government ministries. An illustrative example was the president's replies to public criticisms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite reports from international organizations and op-eds from political analysts about the high numbers of deaths (based on official data from the federal ministry of health), López-Obrador repeatedly dismissed the veracity of such commentaries. He actually referred to his government's crisis management as 'responsible and effective,' and even argued it was 'an example to the world' (López-Obrador, 2020).

A closely related strategy has been that of *ignoring the added value of assessment and evaluation tools*. As mentioned above, López-Obrador's government has shown a disregard for *ex ante* mechanisms needed to assess the feasibility and environmental impacts of his government's megaprojects, particularly the Dos Bocas oil refinery (García, 2021) and the Maya train (Carabaña, 2020). Better regulation procedures used to assess the impact of new regulations have been also ignored, as in the case of the regulatory changes introduced to favor the state-owned electricity company (Saldaña, 2020). When the shortcomings of social programs have been flagged by publicly funded evaluations, government officials have replied with disdain, arguing that evaluation methodologies are useless, or that evaluators did not understand how the programs address 'the needs of the people' (Arteta et al., 2020).

Lastly, another presidential strategy has been that of *disqualifying experts*. As in the delegitimization of certain actors during the agenda-setting process, López-Obrador has

regularly disqualified public intellectuals, non-governmental actors, think tank analyst, and any other actor who questions his policies' rationale or disputes their level of success. The president refers to them as *conservadores* ('conservatives'), who are critical because they have lost their *privilegios* ('privileges') and cannot simply accept 'the people's will' (Espino, 2021). Scientific experts, for instance, have been labeled potentially 'corrupt' (Morales & Villa y Caña, 2020), and their advice on subjects such as the management of the pandemic has been ignored. Assessments from international rating agencies on the government's financial management have been challenged by López-Obrador, who argues they are using methodologies from the 'neoliberal' era that do not account for the corruption variable (Albarrán et al., 2019).

Policy termination

In line with his moralistic discourse (Espino, 2021; Leal, 2021), the president has stated his mission is to 'transform' Mexico's public life (Díaz-Cayeros, 2021; López-Obrador, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2021). This implies tearing down as many institutions from the old regime's as needed to build new ones that truly address 'the people's needs.' More specifically, he has decreed the end of the so-called golden bureaucracy (e.g., public service salary cuts) and the implementation of a governmentwide 'austerity policy,' both deemed to be required to generate savings and transfer extra resources to social programs (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Cejudo & Gómez-Álvarez, 2018; López-Obrador, 2019c).

To sustain this rhetoric, López-Obrador has deployed at least three strategies. First, an ***unjustified termination of institutions, public posts, and tools***. The president has decreed the elimination of institutions as diverse as the tourism promotion office, the agency that supported innovation in small businesses, or the social development institute which provided funding to social organizations (Crail, 2022). Similarly, at least 10 ministerial undersecretariats, hundreds of *Direcciones Generales Adjuntas* (senior executive positions), and thousands of other permanent and temporary public positions have been terminated (Dussauge-Laguna & Aguilar, 2021). The so-called *fideicomisos* (public trusts), used by government agencies and research centers to facilitate flexible and multi-annual projects in science, health, culture, and crisis management, have been eliminated and their funds transferred to the finance ministry (Ortega, 2019). According to the president (see, for instance, López-Obrador, 2020, 2021), this measure was useful to cut waste, reduce corruption, and save thousands of millions of pesos (Monroy, 2021). However, after almost four years in office, the president has yet to provide any data for said savings. Nor has he shown any reliable evidence of corruption in the terminated offices.

A second strategy used by López-Obrador has been that of ***discretionary substitution of public programs***. Without any clear explanation, the president terminated *Prospera*, a conditional cash transfer program established in 1994 to support poor people (Martínez, 2020). *Prospera* provided public funds (calculated according to family conditions) to beneficiaries who had to comply with school attendance and medical appointment requirements. This program was substituted by the program *Becas para el Bienestar Benito Juárez*, which provides unconditional cash transfers to all participating families. According to recent evaluations and academic analyses, this substitution has had negative effects, such as increased social inequalities and reduced school attendance (CONEVAL, 2020d; Jaramillo, 2021; Rodríguez, 2020). More importantly, between 2018 and 2020, poverty levels increased from 41.3% to 43.9% of the population (about 5 million more people; CONEVAL, 2022). A similar issue happened with regards to the *Seguro Popular*, a social

insurance mechanism established in 2003 to pay for medical expenses of people who did not have social security (Frenk & Gómez, 2022). This was replaced in November 2019 by the *Instituto de Salud para el Bienestar*, an agency that was never operational and was further substituted by the *IMSS-Bienestar* program in April 2022 (Campos & Cano, 2022). According to official data from CONEVAL (2022), after the elimination of the Seguro Popular about 15 million more people lost access to health services (from 16.2% of the population in 2018, to 28.2% in 2020), right before the Covid-19 pandemic.

A final strategy used by López-Obrador has been *discretionary austerity*. In addition to the termination of organizations and programs, the López-Obrador administration has implemented an austerity policy that formally applies governmentwide, but in practice has had very different effects across policy sectors. On the one hand, budgetary and personnel cuts have significantly affected most areas of the federal public administration, including health, education, and regulatory policies (see data compiled in México Evalúa, 2002; Moy, 2019). Several media reports have documented delays in regulatory permit approvals, problems to preserve historical sites, and undersupply of medical inputs in public hospitals (Bautista, 2020; Hernández, 2020b; Sandoval, 2019). On the other hand, the president's priority projects have not faced any shortage of funds. For instance, the *Secretaría de Energía* (ministry for energy), in charge of building the Dos Bocas oil refinery, received a 578% increase on its budget for FY 2021 (Roldán, 2022). The oil refinery itself is expected to cost about 40% more than initially planned (Stillman et al., 2022). A similar pattern can be found with regards to the Maya train, a project which received a 76% budget increase from 2021 to 2022 (Ureste, 2022). In the end, austerity has been merely a rhetorical tool to disguise the transfer of public funds from most government areas to a few priority projects.

Discussion

The Mexican experience provides a useful starting point to reflect about how policymaking processes happens under a populist government. The following discussion is divided following the three main topics the article has addressed: the promises and perils of populist policymaking; the place Mexico has in the broader universe of contemporary populist experiences; and the implications the case has for debates in the policy sciences.

Populist policymaking in Mexico

The analysis of López-Obrador's administration shows that a populist government may fulfill some of its promises to 'the people,' but this comes with a heavy price in social, bureaucratic, and policymaking terms. On the one hand, the analysis showed López-Obrador has frequently expressed a particular interest in attending to the needs of the 'the people,' understood as those members of society which are in need of government aid (e.g., the poor, indigenous groups, the elderly, the young without work). This interest in 'the people' has been both rhetorical (e.g., during the daily *conferencias mañaneras*) and practical: The government agenda has included social programs and projects focused on both the needy and underdeveloped regions. To speed up bureaucratic operations, López-Obrador has centralized implementation, used parallel administrative structures, and employed policy tools which are easier to manage (e.g., unconditional cash transfers). The president has also reported his administration's progress and achievements directly to 'the people,' in an unmediated manner through regular public assemblies. Lastly, his commitment to 'the

people’ has been shown through his decisive actions to terminate public institutions and administrative structures deemed to be corrupt, wasteful, or both. A governmentwide ‘austerity policy’ has been pursued to end with the *gobierno rico*, (allegedly) generate savings, and thus provide extra funds for social programs for the *pueblo pobre* (‘poor people’).

On the other hand, the strategies López-Obrador has used in each one of the policy stages have significantly departed from the policymaking standards usually associated with democratic regimes. His approach to agenda-setting has undermined the pluralistic nature of such processes, while at the same time it has left significant and sometimes urgent public issues (e.g., government aid during the pandemic) deliberately unattended. The president’s simplistic take on policy formulation and design has been deeply inefficient and damaging to the broader functioning of the state. The use of policy tools which may offer high political (e.g., cash transfers and subsidies) and symbolic (e.g., megaprojects) dividends in the short term also undermines longer term policy effectiveness. This is either because no public service infrastructure is being built, or because no broader environmental, economic, or technological factors are being seriously taken into account. Something similar happens in policy implementation, as the administrative channels used by López-Obrador become more personalistic and politicized, and delivery is mainly focused on showing to ‘the people’ that the president is a man of his word. As these implementation patterns make their way, the need to consolidate neutral and professional bureaucratic corps is simply ignored. The technical and rational essence of policymaking also vanishes in the face of evaluation processes which are tied to alternative facts and propaganda exercises led by the president, while objective performance indicators, international benchmarks, and expert judgements are either ignored or disqualified by him. Finally, discretionary decisions on institutional and program termination, salary cuts, and austerity policies heavily undermine administrative capacities, public services provision, rule of law principles, and policy predictability. At the same time, they severely affect welfare and rights of program beneficiaries and public servants alike.

To summarize the Mexican experience and give way to a discussion of its similarities and differences regarding other national cases, Table 3 synthesizes the theoretical expectations from Tables 1 and 2 about populist and democratic policymaking styles, and contrasts them with the empirical findings from the López-Obrador administration. A key insight from the Mexican case is the series of strategies the president has used in each one of the policy stages, also summarized below.

Mexico and contemporary populism

As interesting as the Mexican experience may be, one should ask whether it reflects broader international patterns, or is just an exceptional experience. There is enough evidence to think it is a bit of both. The case of Mexico is clearly in line with other contemporary populist regimes, such as Venezuela, Hungary, the USA, or Brazil. Taking Bartha et al.’s (2020) ‘ideal type’ of populist policymaking, López-Obrador has clearly emphasized a majoritarian logic in which the preferences of ‘the people’ (both rhetorically and through certain instances, such as public consultations) legitimize any government decision. At the same time, his administration has been hostile against social and political minorities, as well as members of the society who are portrayed as part of a privileged elite. The latter has included academics, feminist groups, and think tank analysts, among others, whose legitimacy to engage in policy debates has been questioned systematically. As other populist leaders, López-Obrador has appropriated the right to interpret ‘the people’s needs,’

Table 3 Populist and democratic policymaking styles: theoretical expectations contrasted to the Mexican experience

Policy stage	Theoretical expectations about populist policymaking	Examples from the Mexican case which fulfill populist promises	Examples of populist policymaking strategies from the Mexican case which materialize populist perils	Theoretical expectations about democratic policymaking
Agenda-setting	Involvement of previously excluded actors, but potential exclusion of other 'illegitimate' actors Agenda items aligned with populist leader's priorities 'Unmediated' communication with the public	Inclusion of issues and projects related to excluded social sectors Partial links between public concerns and government agenda	Systematically biasing the public agenda Neglecting the social relevance of certain policy topics Delegitimizing policy actors	A priori, any actor interested in a subject or (potentially) affected by a policy can get involved Influence varies due to resources, access, etc.
Policy formulation and design	Direct communication to the electorate Information about 'non-priorities' usually ignored	Use of public consultations on certain policy issues Use of instruments that directly address social needs (e.g., unconditional cash transfers and subsidies) Infrastructure projects in underdeveloped regions	Advancing ill-designed hunch-based policies 'Ambiguous legality' modus operandi Making of personalistic and potentially clientelist policies	A variety of analytical tools are used (e.g., logic frameworks, cost-benefit analysis, forecasting, environmental/regulatory impact analyses, systematic reviews, experiments, benchmarks) Policy efficiency/effectiveness, value for money, causality will be primary concerns

Table 3 (continued)

Policy stage	Theoretical expectations about populist policymaking	Examples from the Mexican case which fulfill populist promises	Examples of populist policymaking strategies from the Mexican case which materialize populist perils	Theoretical expectations about democratic policymaking
Implementation	<p>Implementation complexities ignored</p> <p>Discretionary patterns</p> <p>Fewer non-governmental actors involved</p> <p>Use of ‘clientelar networks’</p>	<p>Use of mechanisms and structures to increase control and implement ‘the people’s will’</p>	<p>Performative implementation</p> <p>Symbolic delivery</p> <p>Using parallel administrative structures</p> <p>Making use of extensive networks of loyalists</p>	<p>Policy decisions are bound by the rule of law</p> <p>Changes to the legal framework need to follow established procedures</p> <p>Discretionary decisions are possible, albeit as a result of policy needs and not caprice</p>
Evaluation	<p>Limited role for expertise</p> <p>Scientific evidence regularly sidelined</p>	<p>Use of frequent and direct progress reports to ‘the people’</p>	<p>‘Alternative facts’ model of evaluation</p> <p>Ignoring the added value of assessment and evaluation tools</p> <p>Disqualifying experts</p>	<p>Arguments, reasons, evidence, accounts about the adequacy of policies are provided</p> <p>Accountability and monitoring/evaluation mechanisms are institutionalized</p>
Policy termination	<p>More frequent than before</p> <p>Discretionary patterns</p>	<p>Policy and program termination, budgetary cuts, and administrative reorganizations to allegedly better provide for ‘the people’</p>	<p>Unjustified termination of institutions, public posts, and tools</p> <p>Discretionary substitution of public programs</p> <p>Discretionary austerity</p>	<p>Difficult to achieve</p> <p>Policy changes as most likely outcome</p>

while at the same time following a clearly anti-pluralist attitude, describing all actors who oppose or criticize him as enemies of ‘the people’ (Müller, 2016, 2017).

There are other similarities between the Mexican case and recent populist experiences, and between López-Obrador’s strategies and those of other populist leaders, such as Orbán, Chávez, Trump, or Bolsonaro. Through his daily *conferencias mañaneras* and his periodic *informes*, López-Obrador has built his own unmediated communication channels (Levitt & Ziblatt, 2018). He has colonized federal bureaucracies through patronage and political loyalists (Moynihan, 2022a, 2022b; Müller, 2016). He has abused participatory governance tools using illegal public consultations (e.g., cancellation of the new airport), which are then presented publicly as democratic exercises which legitimize his decisions (Batory & Svensson, 2019). He has designed and implemented several public programs which have a strong clientelist flavor, both in terms of building loyalties among certain groups of voters and in terms of their management and branding (De la Torre, 2017; Muno & Briceño, 2021). He has favored propaganda and ‘alternative facts’ instead of scientific or evidence-informed decisions, even during the Covid-19 pandemic (Head & Banerjee, 2020; Peci, 2022; Peci et al., 2022). He has decreed, on a discretionary basis, the termination of several programs and public positions (Borins, 2018). All in all, López-Obrador’s government has been mostly characterized for producing what Goodsell (2019) labels ‘policies not thought out.’

Also in line with many other populist experiences (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990, 2007; Funke et al., 2020; Peters, 2022), the Mexican experience shows that populism brings with it considerable policy, institutional, and social damage. Behind its rhetorical appeal, populist policy decisions and policymaking patterns cause heavy damage both to policy institutions (e.g., programs, bureaucracies, tools) and to the very ‘people’ they are supposed to help. Indeed, after three years in office, the policies of the López-Obrador administration have not proved to be better than those from previous governments. On the contrary, López-Obrador’s decisions to terminate programs such as *Prospera* or the *Seguro Popular* have increased poverty levels, inequalities, and reduced access to health services among the poorest.

Beyond these similarities, the Mexican case also shows at least two unique features which deserve to be studied further. First, perhaps with the only exception of Chávez, no other populist leader seems to have used as frequently and systematically the media as López-Obrador does with his daily *conferencias mañaneras*. This has become a rather powerful tool for advancing his political agenda and keeping his popularity almost intact, despite his government’s lack of good policy results. Second, again with the only exception of Venezuela, probably no other populist has used the armed forces in such an extensive way as López-Obrador. This has been helpful for him to bypass traditional bureaucratic procedures, tighten control, and streamline the implementation of presidential priorities. The broader administrative and democratic implications of these actions on administrative capacities, policy coherence, or accountability are yet to be analyzed.

Populist policymaking and the policy sciences

The analysis of the Mexican experience, and of populist policymaking in general, has important implications for policy studies. For instance, the way López-Obrador has approached agenda-setting processes seems to suggest that scholars should probably focus more on how populist leaders deliberately block or minimize issues so that they cannot access the government’s agenda. Similarly, despite the long-held scholarly consensus about

the challenges of terminating policies, the Mexican experience does show that conditions for eliminating (or radically substituting) public programs and institutions are probably different under populist regimes.

At a broader level, there are questions about how to approach (analytically, methodologically, and theoretically) a mode of policymaking which departs so clearly from the ‘Panglossian’ view that has traditionally characterized policy analysis and research. For instance, how to analyze the design or evaluate the effects of policies which have been enacted following something as loose as ‘the will of the people’ (as expressed by a leader), but which lack clear technical, scientific, or evidence foundations? What standards for comparison and assessment should we use when discussing policymaking patterns across nations, or even within the same country across time, in the presence of populist episodes?

Lastly, from a normative perspective, populist policymaking raises significant questions for the so-called policy sciences of democracy. What to think about policies that have been legitimized ‘in the name of the people,’ despite merely being a product of one leader’s view? Can we think about policies being truly ‘public’ when only those who are part of ‘the people’ (as defined by the populist leader) can have a say about them, while others labeled ‘enemies’ cannot despite their interests, expertise, or resources? Can ‘human dignity’ or other basic rights be preserved if policymaking follows populist patterns (such as those described above), instead of the rule of law, rational analysis, or scientific inquiry, principles which Laswell advocated and associated with democratic systems?

Conclusions

While discussions about the potential promises and perils of populism on democratic governance abound, analyses on the actual consequences that populist governments have on policymaking remain scarce. Building on different bodies of literature and a variety of information sources, this article has analyzed the consequences that an actual populist government may have on agenda-setting, policy formulation and design, implementation, evaluation, and termination processes. It has focused on the case of Mexico (governed since 2018 by Andrés-Manuel López-Obrador) and used a variety of policy examples to illustrate how the president’s populist style has affected policymaking.

The article shows that a populist government fulfills some of its promises, but also materializes many of its perils for democratic policymaking. The Mexican experience confirms policymaking patterns previously found in populist regimes in other jurisdictions. At the same time, it provides original insights into the specific strategies populist leaders may use to advance their political agendas. The case also raises some important theoretical and normative questions on how to think about public policy in contexts that depart, on a systematic and profound manner, from the rational, pluralistic, and evidence-informed principles that are expected from policymaking processes in a democracy.

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