

# Political Emotions, Populism and Autocratization: Fear, Anger and the Construction of Crisis in Contemporary Politics<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**— This article examines the role of political emotions in democratic and populist systems. It argues that the emotional grammar of populism contributes to autocratization by transforming fear, anger and victimhood into instruments of political cohesion, institutional delegitimation and leader-centered rule. With particular attention to Latin America, it analyzes how populism operates in contexts marked by affective polarization, crisis narratives, and leader-centered forms of political identification. Although all forms of politics rely on emotions, populism is distinguished by its emphasis on negative emotions such as anger and fear, its intensification of the sense of crisis, its performative approach to politics, and its promotion of confrontational dynamics. Drawing on psychological, political, and economic theories of emotions, this article shows how populist leaders use emotions to polarize society, create scapegoats, weaken democratic institutions, and prolong their hold on power.

**Keywords**— Emotions, anger, fear, populism, and democracy.

## Introduction

This article begins by explaining that the basic emotions, surprise, sadness, fear, disgust, happiness, and anger, are universal, short-lived responses triggered by external stimuli, although their expression is shaped by social and cultural contexts. In politics, these emotions can be induced and molded to influence the behavior of audiences.

The article argues that, whereas democratic politics tends to employ emotions more intensely during electoral campaigns and subsequently adopts a more restrained rhetoric, populism transforms the public sphere into a permanent emotional arena. From this perspective, it examines how populist leaders use fear, anger, the rhetoric of victimhood, the division between “the people” and “the elite”, the evocation of crisis, and social media to polarize society, construct scapegoats, weaken democratic institutions, and legitimize their hold on power.

There are three major approaches that link political emotions to the exercise of power. The first focuses on language and argues that a key distinction between traditional and populist politics lies in the intensification of emotional rhetoric (Breeze,

2017; Van Leeuwen, 2014). The second examines crisis as both a political catalyst and a source of legitimacy, while also exploring the emotional reactions of citizens toward political leaders (Altheide, 2017; Applebaum, 2021; Campanella & Dassù, 2019; Elster, 1979; Moffitt, 2015; Urbinati, 2020; Wagner, 2014). The third is rooted in psychology and establishes that emotions mobilized from positions of power affect audiences by amplifying negative emotions and reshaping feelings that had previously been broadly accepted within the political sphere (Bude, 2018; Ekman, 1994; Illouz & Sicron, 2023).

These three perspectives converge on the idea that emotions shape citizen’s perceptions of political leaders and alter the relationship between rulers and the ruled. They also suggest that the political use of emotions can foster polarization and encourage the construction of scapegoats, who serve to displace responsibility for policy failures and political contradictions. In this regard, the literature on political emotions warns that their instrumentalization by populist leaders may erode democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, there is still a lack of a comprehensive framework explaining how populist leaders construct scapegoats through emotional discourse and what mechanisms they employ to portray them as threats to the public. Accordingly, in addition to reviewing the existing literature, this article draws on contributions from scholars who have analyzed political power through the sacrificial construction of scapegoats and the ritual dimensions of populist politics (Anspach, 2011; Dumouchel, 2015; Márquez, 2023; Palaver, 2019).

The methodological framework of this article is to develop a systematic theoretical-conceptual analysis based on specialized literature on political emotions, populism, affective polarization, political performance, crisis narratives, and digital communication. The paper reconstructs the emotional mechanisms beyond a single case or quantitative research, that are used by the populist discourse and how it can help to the process of autocratization. Focusing mainly on Latin America, where the populist leadership, polarization and emotional political speech has been relevant in recent years.

The paper departs from the premise that populism can contribute to autocratization through emotional mechanisms.

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Populist leaders promote the perception of crisis, which can activate negative emotions, fear, anger and dividing society between friends and enemies. Emotional dependence weakens the institutions, nullifies opposition and helps to concentrate power through moral and political justifications, so the autocratization appears to be acceptable and normalize.

## Constructing Crisis

The use of emotions is often presented as a response by populist leaders to a crisis inherited from traditional political elites. From this perspective, populism emerges as an alternative to the crisis of representation, the erosion of dominant ideologies, and widespread feelings of public grievance (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2022).

This explanation, however, is problematic. Neither Mouffe nor Laclau clearly define what is meant by “crisis”, nor do they explain how a highly emotional discourse could effectively address the problems attributed to traditional elites (Moffitt, 2015). Consequently, several scholars have questioned the existence of a direct relationship between crisis and populist success (Mudde, 2007; Rovira, 2017). Evidence suggests that support for populism is driven less by economic crises than by subjective perceptions of threat, insecurity, and grievance (Michel et al., 2020; Moffitt, 2015).

From this standpoint, what matters is not the crisis itself but the ability to amplify its perception (Knight, 1998). Populism constructs a permanent narrative of failure through the identification of culprits, the delineation of “the people”, the continuous dissemination of messages of emergency, and the promise of simple solutions embodied in strong leadership (Moffitt, 2015).

Emotions are essential to make this construction credible. Populist leaders replace emotions perceived as moderate or conciliatory with others designed to reinforce feelings of threat and deepen the divide between “us” and “them” (Breeze, 2019). By contrast, traditional democratic leadership tends to perform a function of emotional containment, seeking to channel fear or anger into more integrative responses. Nussbaum (2019) highlights the example of President George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks, when he sought to prevent fear from turning into hostility toward Muslims and instead promoted sentiments of national unity.

Populism operates differently. It not only intensifies emotions but also redefines which emotions are considered legitimate within the public sphere (Breeze, 2017). Moreover, it transforms emotional mobilization into a permanent way of governance rather than a merely electoral strategy (Márquez, 2023). Its objective is to establish a direct relationship with citizens,

reduce the role of intermediary institutions, and present the leader as the sole figure capable of protecting the people from a constant threat.

The effectiveness of this strategy rests on a continuous performance that projects proximity, authenticity, and commitment to victims. This performative dimension (Aslan, 2021; Moffitt, 2015; Ostiguy, 2017) normalizes high levels of emotional confrontation and turns crisis into a governing tool. Whereas democratic leaders generally employ emotional appeals in exceptional circumstances, populism sustains a permanent narrative of urgency that strengthens political dependence on the leader and reinforces his or her hold on power.

In Latin America, negative emotions mobilized by populist discourse are directed toward those who do not sympathize with the group with which individuals identify. Affective polarization involves rejection of the opposing group, distrust of its members, moral disapproval, and a declining willingness to cooperate politically (Bergman & Fernández, 2025).

Party attachment is not the primary factor driving affective polarization. Unlike the United States and Europe, where hostility toward those who think differently is often rooted in a strong sense of partisan belonging, studies in Latin America show that passions are mobilized primarily through rejection of others. This reflects a negative effect: hostility toward the opposing group is far stronger than any positive sense of belonging to one’s own group (Bergman & Fernández, 2025).

Emotional polarization appears to be encouraged mainly by political elites rather than emerging as a naturally collective phenomenon (Bergman & Fernández, 2025). One of the countries currently displaying the strongest tendency toward rejection of political opponents is Mexico, where the arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been accompanied by a marked increase in affective polarization. Yet this appears to belong to a broader trend throughout Latin America. Between 2014 and 2018, for example, a substantial escalation in the deployment of affective states, specifically fear, anger, and enthusiasm, was observed within Brazil (Espí Hernández, 2019). These emotions strengthen negative identities by fostering animosity toward others (Areal, 2022). Even countries characterized by high electoral volatility, that is, countries with weaker partisan attachments, have experienced a rise in the use of negative emotions, as is exemplified by Peru.

The most intense emotions tend to emerge when a crisis has advanced, at least rhetorically. For populist leaders to maintain the perception that they are indispensable to the nation, they must cultivate the idea of an imminent crisis. Therefore, the use of emotions becomes a constitutive element of populism (Espí Hernández, 2019). Emotional mobilization shapes perception of public problems and how citizens participate politically;

both dynamics contribute to the autocratization of populist leaders, a pattern observable in many populist movements.

In this sense, regardless of whether they emerge in Europe, the United States, or Latin America, twenty-first-century populist movements share a common emotional basis (Espí Hernández, 2019). Through this emotional framework, populist leaders create the traditional dichotomies of populism, people versus elite, honest versus corrupt, and so forth. Emotional appeals simplify political conflict while simultaneously promoting a sense of urgency and mobilization.

This relationship between crisis narratives and political action is largely determined by the types of emotions employed by populist leaders. These emotions are primarily fear, anger, and enthusiasm. Fear allows leaders to construct threats, transforming social uncertainty into an identifiable danger. Anger emerges as a reaction to perceived injustice and is directed against a supposedly guilty elite. Finally, enthusiasm helps create a mobilized community. Populism requires the production of hope (Espí Hernández, 2019).

Although much of the recent literature focuses on affective polarization, there are historical experiences in which emotions not only structure political identities but also shape the very relationship between citizens and the state. The use of emotions as a mechanism of autocratization is not new. In Latin America, this phenomenon can be traced back to earlier experiences, and the Cuban case is particularly illustrative.

The Cuban crisis helps to understand contemporary electoral populism, but it cannot be posited as a direct equivalent. It illustrates how the regime has exploited political emotions to justified the mechanisms of autocratization through loyalty. It is an example of a limit case of how a regime builds an emotional attachment to political regimes and how charismatic leadership is almost sacralized. It also helps to clarify the dynamics of a political power that institutionalize emotions, sacrifice, obedience, and affective commitment.

In Cuba, the political elite exalted emotions to establish a logic of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the Revolution. The Revolution, and later its material embodiment in the state, was projected as a superior entity to the earthly world. The relationship between citizens and the Revolution, or the quasi-divine state, was established through emotions.

According to Timothy Mitchell, the emotions directed toward the state as a superior and separate entity are fundamentally different from ordinary emotions (Mitchell as cited in Aureille, 2022). The state comes to be perceived as a kind of deity toward which citizens direct intense expectations and powerful emotions. Political leaders become central figures in this relationship, serving as intermediaries between the community

and the state, almost like priests guiding citizens regarding which emotions should be felt.

In his speeches, Ernesto “Che” Guevara portrayed himself as an emotional firebrand, “True revolutionaries are guided by great feelings of love” (Guevara, 1977, pp. 16-20). The process of autocratization follows this path. It proposes an emptying of the individual to fill individuals with emotions defined as “revolutionary”. It is the ideal of the “new man”, a titanic character.

Thus the Cuban Revolution can be understood as an emotional reformation of the individual. The populist leader, a charismatic figure undergoing a process of autocratization, not only uses emotions to remain in power and presents himself as the sole viable option within a catastrophic scenario, but also directly affects individuals, constructing a “new man” who responds affectively to the state.

In this way, the relationship with the state entails an emotional bond of such intensity that it triggers a sacrifice (Aureille, 2022). This sacrifice, rooted in emotional intensity, involves two dimensions, first, the state becomes a supramundane affective entity; second, citizens develop an irrational attachment to it. Whether or not the state provides necessary services becomes secondary; its perceived superiority encourages individuals to maintain permanent loyalty. This is a process through which the state ceases to function as a secular institution.

From a critical perspective, this process can be interpreted as a growing subordination of citizen’s judgment to demands for affective loyalty. The democratic principle of holding rulers accountable becomes almost unthinkable. The emotional burden produces a kind of diminished consciousness that can be exploited by the populist leader. The notion of the state as a higher realm becomes difficult to sustain when the State completely abandons its responsibilities, as occurred in post-revolutionary Cuba. In this context, sacrifice becomes both absurd and costly, dividing citizens into two camps, “the people of the State”, who defend the sacrificial devotion demanded by the Revolution, and “ordinary people”, who experience the emotions generated by state abandonment, humiliation, frustration, and resentment (Aureille, 2022).

## **The Rhetoric of Anger and Fear**

Traditional democratic discourse has often been criticized for its perceived lack of emotional appeal (Nussbaum, 2014). In contrast, populism presents itself as a response better suited to the demands of contemporary societies. Since the 1990s, a growing body of scholarship has argued that democracy should become more emotionally engaging and mobilizing, integrating

reason and emotion within political action (Elster, 1979; Rorty, 1989).

The rise of populism occurred within this broader critique of excessive rationalism. Yet the emotions it privileges tend to reinforce intolerance and the friend–enemy logic, particularly through the mobilization of anger and fear (Breeze, 2017; Moffitt, 2015; Nussbaum, 2014). While fear arises in response to diffuse or uncertain threats, anger requires the identification of a responsible agent. The two emotions often emerge simultaneously in situations perceived as critical and encourage both the search for solutions and the assignment of blame (Wagner, 2014).

Populist leaders channel this anxiety by promoting antagonisms and assigning responsibility to specific actors. Their distinctiveness lies not merely in exploiting fear and anger, but in transforming them into permanent instruments of political mobilization and governance (Breeze, 2017). To achieve this, they employ frank, emphatic, and highly simplified language, frequently relying on absolute expressions such as “always”, “never”, “everything”, and “nothing”, which reduce complex problems to easily understandable narratives (Van Leeuwen, 2014).

This discursive clarity is often perceived as honesty. Populist leaders frame politics through simple dichotomies, link threats to identifiable actors, and consistently appeal to negative emotions through concrete imagery and everyday references that bring political conflict into citizen’s lived experience (Breeze, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2014).

Whereas twentieth-century democratic thought sought to limit fear as an organizing principle of public life, populism seeks to transform it into a permanent civic mood (Bude, 2018). Fear strengthens perceptions of collective vulnerability and provides identity to those who see themselves as victims (Altheide, 2017). Consequently, it is not used merely to win elections but to sustain political cohesion through a constant sense of threat (Márquez, 2023; Palaver, 2019).

Anxiety plays a significant role in this process. It legitimizes the existence of enemies held responsible for collective grievances, often defined as abstract categories or statistical groups (Dumouchel, 2015). The repeated circulation of such messages intensifies their emotional impact and combines negative emotions, such as anger, with positive ones, such as hope, thereby strengthening citizen’s affective dependence on the leader (Breeze, 2019).

In this way, the populist leader presents himself or herself as the only possible solution to a crisis that he or she simultaneously contributes to magnifying. The result is a political milieu characterized by emotional intensification, a cult

of personality, and the continuous construction of scapegoats. Collective cohesion ceases to rest on shared institutions or principles and instead becomes dependent on loyalty to the leader and opposition to common enemies (Márquez, 2023; Palaver, 2019).

## **Politics as Performance: Emotions and Populist Rituals**

In addition to intensifying fear and anger, populist leaders frequently present insufficiently substantiated allegations or interpretations as factual certainties (Breeze, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2014). Their objective is to persuade audiences that their vision is more authentic precisely because it is more emotional.

To sustain their closeness to “the people” and shift responsibility onto other actors, populists constantly draw on images from everyday life. The construction of crisis thus combines ordinary elements with extraordinary components that dramatize reality (Moffitt, 2015).

This dramatization is not limited to verbal language. Populists employ paraverbal resources such as crying, laughter, pauses and emphatic shifts in tone to intensify the emotional impact of their messages. These devices reduce symbolic distance between rulers and the ruled while projecting an image of authenticity. Crying is often interpreted as a sign of sincerity, especially when displayed by male leaders, because it brings into the public sphere emotions traditionally associated with the private realm (Aslan, 2021).

Emotional dramatization also helps to resolve two tensions inherent in populism: the need to present oneself simultaneously as both ruler and member of “the people”, and the need to justify increasingly authoritarian practices in the name of an exceptional crisis (Aslan, 2021; Márquez, 2023; Urbinati, 2020). Leaders such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador have relied on such gestures to reinforce an image of proximity, honesty, and commitment to victims (Aslan, 2021).

The primary function of these displays resides in the staging of crises, the reinforcement of emotional identification with victims, and the consolidation of collective unity against common adversaries. Furthermore, they also reduce the gap between rhetoric and governmental practice while counteracting the perception that populists have themselves become a new elite (Aslan, 2021).

The centrality of emotions also reflects the relative ideological weakness of many populist movements. They frequently appeal to primary emotions such as resentment, envy, and grievance to strengthen group cohesion (Ostiguy, 2017). This

strategy fosters exclusionary identities and provides a sense of security in the face of fears that populist discourse itself helps generate (Palaver, 2019).

Alongside anger and fear, nostalgia constitutes one of the emotions most heavily exploited by populism. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to connect private experiences with collective narratives of loss while promising the restoration of an idealized past (Campanella & Dassù, 2019). Whereas democracy often relies on reflective nostalgia, which acknowledges historical change without idealizing the past, populism appeals to restorative nostalgia, portraying history as a golden age interrupted by external forces (Boym, 2015).

When this narrative is combined with perceptions of crisis, nostalgia ceases to be an isolated emotion and becomes an interpretive framework. Problems associated with globalization, interdependence, or cultural change are reinterpreted as consequences of the loss of sovereignty and control. As a result, patriotism, promises of national restoration, and the rejection of external influences come to occupy a central place in populist rhetoric (Applebaum, 2021; Campanella & Dassù, 2019).

Within the Latin American context, we can observe a strong presence of visual elements and symbolic content aimed at constructing a reality in which the populist leader occupies a central place in the collective imagination. The populist leader is introduced and represented in the media through the concurrent fabrication of two distinct archetypes, the extraordinary man and the ordinary man (Salojärvi, 2019). The link between these two images is emotional management. On the one hand, the leader's extraordinary character demands emotions of great intensity; on the other hand, by publicly expressing emotions, the leader draws closer to citizens and encourages them to perceive sacrifice as aimed toward something much larger than the individual leader himself. Opposition movements, by contrast, tend to present images with less emotional content and more institutional messages.

According to a study based on the Global Populism Database, populist leaders employ a distinctive type of discourse designed to evoke and mobilize emotions. It is not only what they say that matters; the way they say it, with a high degree of performativity, is also identifiable in their discursive articulations. Populism is characterized by a distinctive communicative style (Raveau et al., 2024), structured around the recurrent construction of antagonistic divisions "us" and "them", "the people" and "the elite", and by a strong emotional vocabulary centered on hope, indignation, pride, suffering, and injustice.

Populist speeches frequently use simple future tense, creating a strong emphasis on projections and promises, "we will build", "we will transform", "we will achieve" (Raveau et al., 2024). Finally, they frequently employ conditional constructions, such

as "if", "then", and "provided that". These structures imply a request, a kind of sacrifice deemed necessary for the emergence of a desired order.

## **Social Media, Emotional Contagion and Populist Affiliation**

In recent decades, the association between fear and entertainment in the media has grown increasingly strong (Altheide, 2017). Both traditional media and social media have turned fear into a recurring theme, facilitating the adaptation of populist rhetoric, which relies on brief, direct messages focused on concrete threats or on the alleged dangerousness of scapegoats.

Social media platforms constitute an especially favorable atmosphere for populism. By reducing the distance between leaders and citizens, they foster a sense of emotional intimacy that is difficult to achieve through traditional media (Manucci, 2017). This proximity reinforces perceptions of crisis and enables messages to be reproduced and amplified by users themselves (Charquero-Ballester et al., 2024). It also encourages the fragmentation of public debate and reduces exposure to divergent perspectives, a dynamic that is consistent with the populist logic of permanent confrontation (Urbini, 2020).

Following McLuhan (1964), the medium is not neutral; it also shapes the way public reality is interpreted. In populist systems, digital platforms cease to be mere channels of communication and become part of the political narrative itself (Altheide, 2019). Some are even presented as alternatives to traditional political and media elites.

For citizens, social media creates the impression of direct communication with the leader, reinforcing the belief that their emotions and concerns are being heard. The constant repetition of messages about grievances, threats, and antagonisms promotes what Charquero-Ballester et al. (2024) describe as ambient affiliations, a collective identity built upon shared emotions, particularly fear and anger.

Social media also intensifies emotional contagion. Emotions circulate rapidly and are amplified through continuous interaction among users. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, a significant portion of activity on Twitter was characterized by expressions of anger and frustration (Charquero-Ballester et al., 2024).

Consequently, social media strengthens feelings of indignation and resentment while easing the spread of conspiracy theories and crisis narratives (Applebaum, 2021). When individuals perceive a threat to an identity, a value, or a way of life, collective emotions emerge that can be amplified by

populist discourse to reinforce group cohesion and sustain a permanent sense of threat.

In Latin America, scholars have documented a growing emotionalization of digital political campaigns. Recent studies show that social media platforms have become privileged spaces for political communication, where engagement is significantly amplified. Levels of engagement are particularly high during the final fifteen days of electoral campaigns, a period in which political antagonisms become more explicit (Acuña Lorenzo & Rodríguez García, 2025).

Comparative studies indicate that Argentina and Brazil display higher levels of emotional intensity than Chile during the final days of the campaign, whereas the Chilean case shows relatively greater moderation, while still retaining identifiable populist elements. The widespread use of emotional appeals during electoral campaigns reflects a much broader phenomenon, social media environments are especially conducive to populist discourse. Because online interaction is mediated and often less constrained by face-to-face accountability, it favors simplicity, emotionality, antagonism, and personalization. As Acuña Lorenzo and Rodríguez García (2025, p. 8) argue, “digital platforms amplify messages that generate intense reactions”.

Social media has thus become a key arena for the circulation and reinforcement of populist discourse. The relationship is cyclical and driven by increasing emotional intensity. Populist discourse circulates through social media by mobilizing emotions, predominantly negative ones, in order to obtain feedback and political reinforcement. At the same time, social media platforms facilitate populist communication because populist rhetoric is built upon simple, emotionally charged narratives that are easily disseminated online.

Populist leaders mobilize narratives that provide simplified interpretations of political reality and contribute to the consolidation and intensification of affective polarization. This process involves a distinct form of populist storytelling, populated by characters, emotions, antagonists, heroes, and moral plots. These narratives usually unfold through two main patterns.

The first consists of conspiracy stories, based on the idea that a coordinated elite is actively working against the people. The second consists of ostracism stories, narratives in which the people are unjustly excluded from the benefits of the political and economic system (Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024).

These two narrative frameworks generate the highest levels of affective polarization. Their influence is also reflected in the language used to describe political opponents. In Mexico, a country where affective polarization is particularly pronounced, political adversaries are frequently labeled as “corrupt”, a term

employed as a generalized pejorative category (Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024).

Social media platforms reproduce and strengthen what Arias Maldonado (2017) describes as the affective foundations of populism. By creating spirals of silence and facilitating the demonization of opponents, these platforms reinforce moral tribalism and deepen divisions between “us” and “them”. Digital spaces become forums for the construction of emotional identification with the charismatic leader. Populist actors use digital media to express negative emotions “without filters”, while simultaneously criticizing expert elites and privileging the emotional experiences of ordinary people over technical expertise (Arias Maldonado, 2017).

The digital environment has become increasingly confrontational because it amplifies the sense of grievance that populist leaders require to strengthen their relationship with “the people” (Arias, 2017). To maintain the necessary level of emotional intensity, populist messages often contain misleading content. According to Rivera Magos and González Pureco (2024), populist leaders such as Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Nayib Bukele, Gustavo Petro, Luis Arce, and Alberto Fernández display remarkably similar communication styles on social media. More than half of the content they share contains elements of disinformation, misleading information, false connections, extreme simplifications, and hate speech. These messages are also heavily saturated with emotions, particularly anger and pride.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social media does not merely serve as a neutral communication channel for populist leaders. Rather, it functions as a milieu that intensifies emotional polarization, facilitates the construction of collective identities based on resentment and antagonism, and strengthens the emotional bonds that connect leaders with their followers. In this sense, digital platforms have become one of the principal mechanisms through which contemporary populism reproduces itself and expands its political influence.

## Conclusions

All political discourse appeals to emotions, whether in democratic or populist contexts. However, the exaltation of negative emotions such as anger and fear constitutes a central feature of populism (Altheide, 2017). This strategy dramatizes politics, consolidates scapegoats, differentiates the leader from his or her predecessors, and reinforces perceptions of crisis (Aslan, 2021; Breeze, 2017; Márquez, 2023; Moffitt, 2015).

To achieve this, populist leaders employ a rhetoric of emotional intimacy and affective immediacy (Van Leeuwen, 2014), which facilitates the centralization of power and the cultivation

of personality cults (Palaver, 2019). Media outlets and social media platforms amplify this process by reducing the distance between rulers and citizens, encouraging emotional contagion, and organizing previously dispersed emotions through forms of ambient affiliations (Charquero-Ballester et al., 2024). This strengthens the leader's capacity to provoke audiences, weaken the opposition, and politically mobilize anger (Applebaum, 2021).

The emotional grammar of populism contributes to autocratization by weakening the institutional and symbolic foundations of liberal democracy. Through the constant production of threats, the personalization of power, and the construction of scapegoats, populist leaders encourage citizens to perceive politics less as a contest among institutions and more as a struggle between moral communities. Under these conditions, loyalty to the leader increasingly replaces commitment to democratic procedures, while opposition actors are redefined as enemies rather than legitimate political adversaries.

The analysis also suggests that emotions do not merely accompany autocratization; they actively facilitate it. Fear legitimizes extraordinary measures, anger directs hostility toward designated culprits, and hope sustains the expectation that the leader alone can restore justice and order. Together, these emotions create a political environment in which the concentration of power appears necessary, desirable, and even morally justified.

The Cuban experience illustrates an especially revealing form of this dynamic. There, emotional attachment to the Revolution and the state acquired quasi-sacred dimensions, transforming political loyalty into a form of sacrifice. Although contemporary populist movements in Latin America do not reproduce this model in its entirety, they share a tendency to organize political life around emotional bonds that transcend institutional accountability. In both cases, emotions become a means through which political authority seeks not only obedience but also affective commitment.

Political emotions therefore function not merely as expressive resources but also as instruments for the preservation of power. This raises an important question, whether their permanent intensification represents a temporary phase of contemporary politics or whether it will ultimately consolidate itself as a new dominant mode of political action.

Understanding the relationship between emotions and autocratization is therefore essential for assessing the future of democracy. If democratic institutions are to resist authoritarian tendencies, they must recognize that political conflicts are fought not only through laws, elections, and institutions, but also through the emotions that shape citizen's perceptions of reality, belonging, and legitimacy.

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