

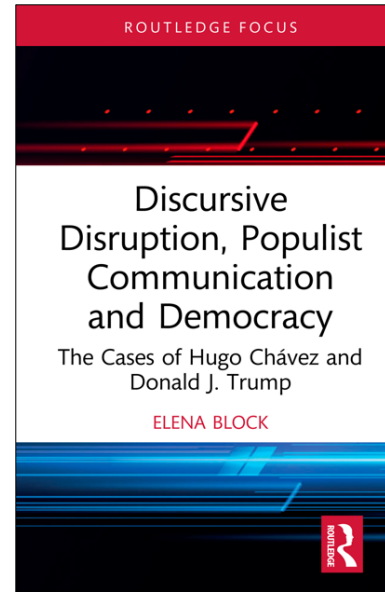
Elena Block, **Discursive Disruption, Populist Communication and Democracy: The Cases of Hugo Chávez and Donald J. Trump**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 148 pp., \$24.75 (paperback), \$64.95 (hardcover).

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Elena Block's recent text, **Discursive Disruption, Populist Communication and Democracy: The Case of Hugo Chávez and Donald J. Trump**, provides an incisive and well-argued analysis of the divisive rhetoric of both Hugo Chávez and Donald J. Trump, complete with compelling evidence for claims advanced. In the process, she also offers a very useful account of what her key phrase—*discursive disruption*—means, especially in relation to populist rhetoric. In the broad sense, Block's aim is to interrogate the relationship between disruptive language and populism; what she argues is quite simply this: "There is an antidialogic/monologic—and hence *anti-democratic*—speech style that has typically characterized populist actors in positions of power" (p. 1; emphasis in original).

As she notes in beginning the first chapter, populist discourse is on the rise virtually worldwide. Populist discourse is, on its face, a negative and demeaning discourse that has the potential to decrease or obliterate common values inherent in democracy as it further polarizes views of "for and against" whatever the prevailing issues might be. Whether it be rational argument, civil discussion among equals, adherence to the civil rights of others, or the willingness to pursue social justice or following legal dictates, populist rhetoric dismantles any or all of these at will, thereby lessening the common protections a democratic state should automatically provide. Central to her argument is that it is not the "ideas" presented but the communicative style utilized, often by both political sides in a dispute. That something is logical or factually accurate disappears in the face of emotional and irrational appeals that are presented with a marked certainty that brooks no opposition. In this context, the concept of "discursive disruption" becomes the relevant framework within which to unpack in more detail how this kind of rhetoric, in its guise as populist discourse, damages democracy. As her final argument in chapter 1, Block offers a clear analysis of the possible "political communication shutdown" that such discourse can produce. Her prime example is how Chávez's discursive style ended the possibility for rational argument in Venezuela—a condition that remains to this day.

In chapter 2, Block provides a tightly written, well-evidenced conceptual frame as grounding for her later more specific analysis. Her examination of the nature and role of trust, along with "truth" and "lies" in relation to politics, is exemplary. In particular, she notes Trump's success with what media termed the "The Big Lie" (p. 24) as well as Chávez's use of lies and misinformation. While both critiqued the media, they also proved to be adept at using print and social media platforms to spread their virulent rhetoric. She also reviews numerous surveys that support the "eroded discourses of democracy" (p. 26) claim. Following



the extensive discussion of surveys, Block next addresses the relationship between populism and democracy in detail. The discussion reflects work drawing from political communication as well as political sociology, linguistics, and other fields in building a compelling picture of how populist rhetoric may counter the positive features of what constitutes democratic political action: "Populists have managed to disrupt, change, and even destroy democracy *within* democracy" (p. 33; emphasis in original). The last section of this chapter interrogates populist communication from the perspective of communicative style. Her "working definition" is an apt frame for future rhetorical analysis: "patterns of political speech and messaging that employ meaning, language, identity, and tone that together help political actors to connect with their audiences through mediated and unmediated channels of communication" (p. 36). The importance here is that "style" is encompassed within an entire set of features that work together to enhance the perceived value of the discourse. That both Trump and Chávez are masters in playing this rhetorical game is unassailable.

The next chapter focuses more specific attention on "authoritarian populist communication, modern discourses of democracy" (p. 42), and, lastly, a more refined discussion of the nature of disruptive communication itself. The key indices of populist rhetoric are its irrationality and antidialogic nature, as well as highly emotional and likely nontruthful claims. The more the media attacks populist discourse, the more political leaders like Trump and Chávez like it, as it makes them seem more responsive to their core audience. After a brief discussion of contemporary terms—"Audience populism, hate speech, and cancel culture" (pp. 47–48), Block addresses the manner in which the media itself utilizes populist rhetoric. "Media" encompasses a broad range of types—from print/news media to social outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, tabloids, talk shows, etc. She then returns to the subject of "style" and delineates in greater detail the features of three key strategies: "adversarial language, identity politics, and use of and relationship with the media" (p. 49). While she provides an erudite description of what constitutes hate speech as well as "cancel culture" discourse, it would have been helpful to provide actual samples of such discourse to further clarify what each is actually saying. The chapter moves on to a more precise discussion of the relationship between discourse and democracy. In essence, she notes that "democracy *is* communication" (p. 14; emphasis in original), meaning that its very nature is created in and through the discourse used to represent it. The key values of "free and fair elections, rule of law, separation of powers, and other democratic freedoms, rights and duties" (p. 55) are the prime object of what "discursive disruption" aims at whenever these values are put in jeopardy. As she argues, democracy functions best when informed people can discuss a controversial issue in a manner than privileges finding a solution or at least a short-term resolution. The current polarization within political discourse in this country is noted, as it reduces the "common ground" that people need in order to have the kind of conversation that a working democracy can provide.

While discursive disruption has been characterized in multiple ways in the first three chapters, Block's purpose in chapter 4 is to illustrate the primary methods and processes used in critiquing the negative impact of Trump's and Chávez's populist rhetoric on democratic values. She identifies "fear, authority, and ad hominem appeals" (p. 74) as major themes both speakers utilize in addressing audiences. She next identifies precisely what is to be considered in selecting case studies as well as how her textual and critical analysis of disruptive speech will be executed. In addition to specific types of appeals, noted earlier, she focuses on identity manipulation (e.g., referencing patriotism, nationalism, class, race) and the populist rhetor's use of various news media, as well as how each rhetor diminishes respect for such rights as freedom and justice, the separation of powers, rule of law, plural and rational dialogue, and fair elections (p. 75). What emerges from

further details is a well-designed and controlled set of practices that provide, in the actual analysis, a composite picture of both rhetor's style.

In the "penultimate chapter" in the text, the one everything already said builds toward, the analysis is not a disappointment, as Block offers a well-evidenced critical commentary on both speakers. Chávez's rhetoric personified an authoritarian bully who leads via insulting everyone else who might challenge or disagree with his decisions and actions. Trump also employed populist ad hominem as an insulting rhetoric to further separate himself from those with whom he disagreed. Terms such as *fake*, *liar*, *dope*, *crazy*, *disgraced*, and other similar put-downs were common in Trump's addresses. Both managed to become dominant users—in terms of how often they were featured across various media. Both slammed the media at the same time they depended on it as a way to access their respective audiences.

Her last chapter offers a well-crafted summary of her interrogation of the relationship between populism and democracy as illustrated in the discourses of two populist leaders. Chávez managed to revise the political system in Venezuela to give the impression of a participatory governance while retaining all the power. Trump's rhetoric mobilized the disaffected, ultraconservative White population via an aggressive, emotion-laden rhetoric that spurred them to potential violence. Both disrespected the normative values underlying a democratic state. Both created a populist discourse that further galvanized their audiences while creating a polarized community. Block moves on by addressing three indicators of discursive disruption: "autocratic, divisive, and intolerant language" (p. 111), the "shrinkage of shared spaces for dialogue" (p. 113), and "increasing unrest, protests, physical and discursive violence and disruption" (p. 116). Her next section argues that populism "embodies a type of moral language or discourse that thrives on confrontation and disruption" (p. 112; emphasis in original) and furthers the erosion of a sense of shared community.

In closing, this text deserves circulation among political communication experts. It is an excellent account of how populism works to diminish the rights and freedom of the people, while at the same time glorifying the rhetor who seeks to profit (especially in terms of power) from its use.