

In Search of a Theory of Polarization: Lessons from Venezuela, 1999-2005

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The Hugo Chávez Frías administration (1999-present) is the most polarizing government in Venezuela since the late 1940s and in Latin America as a whole since the Sandinistas ruled Nicaragua in the 1980s. Supporters admire Chávez for having inaugurated a new form of democracy, so-called ‘participatory’, which is unabashedly anti-party and presumably more attuned to ordinary citizens. They also admire his call for an alternative economic model, a ‘socialism of the 21st century’, which is decidedly anti-globalization and pro-poor, at least in words. For critics, these are pretty-sounding slogans intended to disguise a new form of authoritarianism – one that uses democratic instruments (electoral majorities) to produce undemocratic outcomes (exclusion of political opponents). Each side sees the other as politically threatening. The disputes between them plunged Venezuela into new levels of political instability. Venezuela in the 1970s was considered a paradigmatic case for the study of democratization, and in the 1980s, for the study of democratic decay. In the 1990s, it became a paradigmatic case for the study of policy incoherence. In the early 2000s, it has emerged as a paradigmatic case for the study of political polarization.

The best works on the Chávez administration focus on the evolution of the political regime – what exactly happened to Venezuela’s democracy in the past 40 years? Yet, even these works have made insufficient progress in understanding the nature of opposition politics under Chávez. In most democracies, the opposition obsesses about how to defeat incumbents. Only in few democracies do opponents and incumbents take the extreme steps witnessed in Venezuela in 2001-04.

This essay is an attempt at drawing lessons from the Venezuelan case to construct theories of political polarization. However, the most recent arguments on the issue of regime type in Venezuela will first be reviewed. This issue is crucial because to understand the dynamics of polarization requires first understanding state policy, which is intrinsically linked to regime type. For that reason, the first part of this essay reviews existing arguments on: 1) the conceptualization of the Chávez regime – is it democratic?; and 2) the origins of the regime, which depending on how the first question is answered, is an exercise in debating theories about the origins of democracy or authoritarianism. I will focus mostly on works published since 2000. After discussing the debate on regime type, I offer some thoughts on how the Venezuelan case can illuminate our theoretical understanding of political polarization.

Transition to?

Directly or indirectly, most scholars studying Venezuela’s current politics address the question of how democratic the Chávez regime is. Political scientists debate

whether democracy ought to be conceptualized as dichotomous or as a graded condition (Collier and Adcock 1999). The dichotomous view holds that democracy requires a minimal set of conditions. Countries either have them or not, just like a woman is either pregnant or not. Proponents of the graded condition argue that countries can have different degrees of democraticness, just like any living organism can have different degrees of livingness. A plant, for instance, can be young or old, fragile or well rooted, and susceptible or resilient to bad weather; it can have mostly healthy leaves or a mix of healthy, unhealthy or even dead leaves all at the same time.

Most Venezuelanists subscribe to the graded view. They recognize that the Chávez regime lies in the 'gray zone' (McCoy and Myers 2004, 1), exhibiting simultaneously 'democratic and authoritarian directions' (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 215). The debate centres on which direction dominates and whether the Chávez regime constitutes a democratic improvement over the previous regime. For some, the new regime represents a net improvement, largely because the 1999 Constitution constitutes 'a step forward' (Viciano Pastor and Martínez Dalmau 2001, 299) or because the new state has boosted social spending (e.g., López-Maya and Lander 2004; Gott 2000). Ellner and Hellinger seem unable to make up their minds about which tendency prevails, but they are convinced, as are Viciano Pastor and Martínez Dalmau, that the ills of the previous regime, the so-called Punto Fijo democracy, were severe, perhaps more so than many ills under Chávez. McCoy and Myers (2004, 3) take the opposite stance: 'when all is said and done, [the Chávez regime] is less open and less pluralistic than its predecessor'.

Defenders of the net democratization thesis highlight at least three concepts when discussing the Chávez regime: renewal, inclusion and social consciousness. They argue that the previous regime had deteriorated so much that a replacement was necessary. This replacement could have taken many forms, including even a non-democratic, unconstitutional route, but Chávez carried out an inclusionary process of renewal through elections and lawful reform (Hellinger in Ellner and Hellinger 2003). Many of the new politicians now in office are either political neophytes, like Chávez, or, at least, came from unprivileged parties or civic organizations. The Chavista Nicolás Maduro, for example, was a former leader of a union of metro operators prior to becoming president of the National Assembly. And by deciding to start his government by focusing on a major constitutional reform (rather than a major economic reform), Chávez triggered a process of nationwide deliberation. As much as 50 per cent of proposals coming from previously excluded civic organizations made it into the new constitution (García-Guadilla in Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 186).

There is consensus that the Chávez movement in 1998 was inclusionary, judged in terms of the groups that supported the coalition. This is clear from the authors in Ellner and Hellinger 2003 and McCoy and Myers 2004. Chávez united not just the very poor and marginalized, but also the middle classes, the intellectuals, the new civic groups, and the military. Chávez achieved this feat because his anti-party platform was unquestionably the pre-eminent rallying cry of almost every Venezuelan in the late 1990s. Another feature in Chávez's 1998 platform that united different classes was its anti-market stand. In every income group, including the upper classes, there is evidence of aversion toward market forces in 1998 (Canache in McCoy and Myers 2004, 43). However, Chávez's anti-market stand, unlike his anti-party stand, did not unify the country. Even in low-income groups, pro-market

advocates were not insignificant, which may explain why opposition to Chávez exploded soon after his first blatant anti-market policies (the 49 decrees in November 2001 increasing state intervention in the economy).

In short, the Chávez movement, at least initially, was not exclusively a poor people's movement. Its anti-party stand united most Venezuelans from all classes, and its anti-market stand united some Venezuelans from all classes. While many scholars marvel at Chávez's popularity among the very poor, the first major revelation of recent scholarship is that he once had the support of many socioeconomic elites, whom Chávez now calls 'oligarchs'. They supported Chávez because they saw in him a solution to *partidocracia* and a shield against the recurrence of the neoliberal reforms of 1989-92, which they never cared for that much (Kelly and Palma in McCoy and Myers 2004).

However inclusionary the Chávez movement may have been at first, there is plenty of evidence that the movement became its own antithesis after 2000. The impetus for regime renewal was replaced with a compulsion to grant privileges to supporters, including impunity over corruption, and to consolidate institutional mechanisms for perpetuating power (e.g., packing the Supreme Court and the institute that regulates elections, the National Electoral Council, with loyalists). The impetus for inclusion was replaced with a desire to impose restrictions on the opposition (the 1999 Constitution bans state funding of political parties; the 2005 reform of the Penal Code bans being disrespectful of government officials). And the government's spending policies have become nothing more than lavish state largess, distributed without any form of accountability, following no criteria of cost-effectiveness and seeking no objective other than electoral opportunism. Similar policies in the past had no impact on employment creation and hence poverty alleviation (Freije in Márquez and Piñango 2003). For Norden, Chávez's reliance on the military parallels what 'would be expected from a military regime' (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 110). In fact, Chávez does not even fool his own followers: what poor people find admirable about Chávez is precisely that he embodies 'centralized power' (Márquez in Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 209-8)

Despite these criticisms, defenders of the net democratization thesis do exist; Gott (2000) and Viciano Pastor and Martínez Dalmau (2001) are evident examples. Their positive assessment could very well be the result of premature judgment: their studies focus on the first years of the regime, arguably the most inclusive. Viciano Pastor and Dalmau offer one of the most scholarly and well-researched accounts of the 'difficult road' to the 1999 constitution and they emerged quite impressed by what they observed. In terms of the diversity of participants, the degree of rights safeguarded and the peacefulness of the change, Venezuela is better off: there are '*más luces que sombras en el proceso venezolano*' (p. 295).

Yet, it is still puzzling how such a meticulous study is so nonchalant about some of the questionably democratic decisions that Chávez made even during this most inclusionary period. For instance, while the Chavista delegation was 'heterogeneous', less than five per cent of the seats went to opposition figures. While the constitution grants many nominal rights to ordinary citizens, the institution of the presidency, followed by the military, obtained the largest expansion of powers vis-à-vis any other group. While the courts approved much of the constitutional process, it is also clear that the government bullied them. And the constituent assembly's decision to disband all the existing state institutions that the Chavistas did not control (the Congress and the Courts) seems too self-serving to count as democ-

matic. All these setbacks of inclusion, accountability and respect for institutions are fully documented in this book, and yet, the authors seem unperturbed by them. Their optimistic assessment is therefore the result of not only premature judgment, but also the authors' unclear criteria for preferring certain democratic norms above others.

A different tactic from brushing aside the authoritarian tendencies is to claim that the preceding regime was worse. It's not clear to me that defending Chávez by arguing that his predecessors were less democratic is much of a defence. Nor is it obvious that the best way to judge the democraticness of a regime is to compare it to the past, rather than to some universal high standard. Nevertheless, most authors engage in cross-time comparisons, and this at least serves to provide insights about differences and similarities between regimes and, sometimes, novel explanations for regime change.

Transition From?

Most Venezuelanists agree that the Chávez regime represents a break from the previous regime (1958-1998). Venezuela's old democracy, to use a favourite term in McCoy and Myers (2004), simply 'unravelling'. Why? The simplest explanation focuses on the plight of the poor. Gott (2000) does a good job at describing the depth and neglect of poverty in Venezuela prior to the rise of Chávez, implying that the former led to the latter. Roberts (Ellner and Hellinger 2003) does an even better job at conceptualizing the grave social changes that have taken place in Venezuela since 1982. He mentions four: 1) economic immiseration, 2) growing inequality, 3) expansion of informality in labour markets, and 4) declining capacity of labour unions to represent workers. Boza (Márquez and Piñango 2003) describes vividly the indignity that unemployment engenders. In short, economic hardship *combined with* a labour representation crisis led to protest politics, and thus, to the rise of a leftist replacement.

The problem with a strictly structural-sociological account as an explanation for regime change, even supplemented with a focus on labour politics, is not that it is wrong, but that it is indeterminate. To be sure, a surplus of poor people explains the Chávez election, but also the election of (at least) the two previous presidents – all very different. Since Venezuela has had surplus poverty since the 1980s, all presidents by necessity must have obtained much of the vote of the poor to beat their rivals. Roberts' characterization of Venezuela in 1998 could very well apply to Venezuela ten years before, or for that matter, to Latin America as a whole in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet, it was only in Venezuela in the late 1990s that there was an electoral rise of a radical leftist/military government. It would have been more instructive for Venezuelanists to try to explain why Venezuela, among so many Latin American nations, produced an escape from economic hardship that was so leftist and militaristic. More explicitly comparative work is thus necessary.

Old institutions

In addition to more cross-country comparisons, explaining Venezuela's puzzling escape avenue requires looking at the institutions of the preceding regime. A key question to ask is why did the traditional parties cease being an option in the mid 1990s? Also, why did the radical left manage to capture this vacuum by first align-

ing itself with an old establishment figure such as Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) and then with the military under Chávez?

Students reading the work of Venezuelanists are more likely to find an answer to the first question than to the second. Tying various authors together, the answer to the first question goes something like this. Venezuela, like the rest of the region, experienced the typical collapse of its statist economic model in the 1980s. Because the political parties were unable to renew themselves, they could not provide appropriate policy responses to the economic crises. Voters responded as they have elsewhere in the region when macroeconomic instability remained unresolved: they blamed the incumbents and existing political institutions, defected toward smaller parties, which in Venezuela, were all on the left, and those who did not find these parties appealing formed or joined civic groups. The rise of Chávez is thus the result of two different institutional developments: the sudden rise of extreme, formerly marginal parties at the expense of traditional parties and the momentous rise of contestatory civic organizations that were more antipartisan than nonpartisan. By promising to displace the old parties – in collaboration with the military – Chávez seduced these two new societal blocks.

We know from Sherry Berman's (1997) famous study of Nazi Germany that the problem with countries experiencing collapsing parties *and* rising anti-party civic groups is that they are prone to democratic decay. The leader heading this pro-displacement movement, if successful, is left with few constraints on his power (Corrales 2001). However, Molina and Ellner, in separate chapters, somewhat disagree. They show that Chávez has not been able to do away with, or completely dominate, all democratic institutions. Supporters claim that Chávez has not really tried to do so; critics contend that that's all Chávez spends his time thinking about. If the critics are right that Chávez constantly strategizes about how to consolidate a fierce dictatorship, then a new puzzle emerges – why hasn't Chávez achieved total control? International factors no doubt matter: the international climate today is not forgiving of blatant authoritarianism in the western hemisphere. But domestic conditions are also important. The old institutions, however weak in 1998, retained some fighting capacity vis-à-vis the state and have effectively blocked Chávez's desire to establish a 'new hegemony', to borrow López-Maya's term (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 89). Given this institutional capacity to resist, Molina proposes that the politics of democratic decay are different in countries that have recently experienced party deinstitutionalization (such as Venezuela) than in those with long-standing party de-institutionalization: in the former, it is much harder to establish full dictatorships. This suggests that the combination of rising civil society and declining political parties is not as dismal for democracy as some have argued, including me. Or else, it could be that, as I argue later, there is something about the dynamics of polarization that allows weak institutions to resuscitate, even if temporarily.

The question still remains as to why traditional parties failed to offer appropriate policy responses to economic crises since 1983. I have argued that the lack of real contestation within the traditional parties, especially *Acción Democrática* (AD), created party oligarchies that blocked necessary party adaptation in the early 1990s (Corrales 2002). Parties were unable to incorporate new knowledge and new blood. What is harder to answer is why the Caldera administration, which was supported by presumably more internally democratic parties such as the MAS, also failed. The explanation could very well be a different variable altogether: the post-1992 rise of party fragmentation. We know that party fragmentation hinders gov-

ernance (Mainwaring 1999). A more adept leader, perhaps one less tied to Venezuela's former bipartisanship, might have managed party fragmentation better. But President Rafael Caldera, who worked all his life to institutionalize bipartisan rule in Venezuela, was clearly not the right politician for multiparty Venezuela.

The second unanswered question is, why did the radical left feel so comfortable forming an alliance with the military in 1998? This odd marriage has not occurred in Latin America since the 1970s. No doubt, the military shared the anti-party sentiment of the radical left. But this seems to be an insufficient basis for a military alliance with the radical left, of all groups. It is true that the military has not been uniformly behind Chávez. Still, a major chunk of the military has continued to support – or at least tolerate – Chávez, even as he has veered further to the left, and a major chunk of Venezuela's left continues to support Chávez even as he turns more militaristic. The origins and internal dynamics of this leftist-military alliance remain an open question.

Renewal Attempts: Bad Reforms, Insufficient Reform or Asymmetrical Reforms?

Another debate about institutions focuses on the course of reform during the last stages of the Punto Fijo regime. The question is whether the persistence of Venezuela's bad economic performance was the result of bad reforms, insufficient reforms or asymmetrical reforms. The argument on behalf of bad reforms is exemplified by Buxton and Mommer (both in Ellner and Hellinger 2003). In Buxton's account, Venezuela suffered the ravages of orthodox neoliberal adjustment, first under Carlos Andrés Pérez between 1989 and 1992 and then under Rafael Caldera between 1996 and 1998. She echoes the typical view on the left that market reforms aggravate poverty. Mommer, today one of Chávez's main advisers on oil policy, follows a similar logic: neoliberalism was excessively applied to the oil sector, leading to a more autonomous state-owned oil company (PDVSA) whose managers became more interested in forming partnerships with multinationals than in transferring profits to the state for social investments. He calls on more state control over PDVSA.

Buxton's argument is overstated, and Mommer's account is internally contradictory. Venezuela's experience with market reforms was modest, at best. To be sure, Pérez and Caldera achieved trade opening and some grand privatizations, but the degree of statism, dependence on oil, protectionism, market rigidities, fiscal volatility, inflation and rent-seeking remained conspicuous through the 1990s. In fact, as a result of the 1993-1996 banking crisis and the state-heavy response to it, the Venezuelan private sector actually became weaker and smaller (Ortiz in McCoy and Myers 2004). It is hard to make the case, as do Chávez and implicitly Buxton, that Venezuela in the 1990s was a bastion of neoliberalism. Better labels for Venezuela's political economy in the 1990s are lingering statism, policy incoherence and inability to stabilize oil income streams. This creates a methodological problem for Buxton: there are at least four potential culprits for Venezuela's economic hardship in the 1990s, but she only focuses on market reforms, the least powerful of the four. And the problem with Mommer is that he blames the political system prior to Chávez for failing to exercise more control over PDVSA, but offers no discussion of how to make the new, more controlling state more accountable.

An alternative form of argumentation is that the problem with the Punto Fijo regime was not excessive change but rather insufficient change. This thesis is best

exemplified by López-Maya: ‘Between 1989 and February 1992, the Pérez government continued its economic program without introducing substantial social reforms’ (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 88). There is no question that many reforms went unprovided in the 1990s, but to argue that too little reform was introduced is to miss an important story of the 1990s. In terms of social spending, the Pérez administration was quite generous. And politically, starting in 1989, Venezuela underwent some of the most significant reforms since the transition to democracy in 1958: direct elections for governors and mayors, laws calling for decentralization of finances, and reforms of the electoral system.

These reforms were so consequential that one could argue that the unravelling of the Punto Fijo regime occurred, not because the system failed to reform, but because the political reforms went too far. The dramatic institutional opening of the 1990s permitted the rise of new, locally elected leaders, who felt less dependent on their party’s national leadership (because they were elected directly) and thus freer to challenge the party’s leadership (Kornblith in Márquez and Piñango 2003). This generated tensions within parties, which explains the crises within parties of the 1990s. These tensions perhaps went too far, ultimately leading to policy incoherence at the state level.

On the other hand, one could argue that the tensions were just what the doctor ordered because that is exactly what causes ossified institutions to self-renew. The best evidence that the regime, institutionally at least, was turning less rigid is precisely the fact that such a large movement of newcomers won in 1998. Decentralization was working to liberalize the regime. The right policy prescription was to deepen it (Álvarez in Ellner and Hellinger 2003). Yet, decentralization was never allowed to deepen. It turns out that the blocking of decentralization started, not with Chávez, but with Caldera. In 1997, four years into the Caldera administration, the Venezuelan central government still controlled 94.8 per cent of all public income and 79.1 per cent of all expenditures, far above the average for Latin America and some industrialized countries (de la Cruz in McCoy and Myers 2004). The reforms were therefore asymmetrical – strong on the political-legal side, but weak in terms of allocated resources. By failing to feed decentralization, the Caldera administration may have fuelled political frustrations and even the rise of Chávez.

Few authors express it this way, but one could thus derive from recent scholarship on Venezuela an entirely unconventional explanation for the unravelling of the Punto Fijo regime and the rise of a leftist-military regime. Rather than being too undemocratic and hermetic, the previous regime became more democratic, at least institutionally. By 1992, this brought about the displacement of old parties, AD and Copei (the social-Christian party, *Comité de Organización Político Electoral Independiente*), and the rise of new or previously blocked parties. Institutional opening, rather than institutional decay, may be the best explanation for regime change.

Polarization since 1999: To coup or to recoup

Another conclusion that could be derived is that, once in office, the new parties that rose in the 1990s committed an act of institutional reversal. Rather than deepen the process of institutional opening that made their rise possible, they closed off political competition, reversed decentralization and offered more impunity to the in-groups. In other words, the new winners of the 1990s replicated what AD and

Copei did in the '70s and '80s: safeguard themselves from competitive forces by limiting contestation, both within their ranks and throughout the polity.

If so, then there is an explanation for heightened instability under Chávez that competes with the arguments of those who approach this question from a class perspective (e.g., Gott 2000, Ellner and Hellinger 2003). For structuralists, the polarization of 2001-2004 stemmed from old winners (mostly white elites) refusing to accept the new winners (the majority of Venezuelans, who happen to be non-white, poor and *Chavistas*) and hoping to restore their old privileges. The alternative view is that polarization stemmed from the state of shock on the part of the many citizens and organizations that had been ardent critics of *partidocracia* and had welcomed the political reforms of the 1990s, and then found themselves dismayed by the return of old vices on the part of the new state elites.

Government sympathizers look at the ranks of the opposition and they see groups like AD, Copei, Fedecámaras, the CTV, the Church and the old managers of PDVSA – all key institutions of the Punto Fijo regime. They also see a coup attempt in 2002 and a major business-supported oil strike in the 2002-2003 winter. All this confirms suspicions that the opposition is reactionary and obstructionist. But that's only one facet of the opposition. The opposition also includes actors such as Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, la Causa R, MAS, Bandera Roja, Queremos Elegir, Izquierda Unida, Verdad Venezuela, leading newspapers and many other groups that were either inexistent or prominent critics during the Punto Fijo era. Some were even initial supporters of the Chávez administration. They don't seek coups, but rather, they seek to recoup the democratic gains of the 1990s. A class-based explanation cannot account for the size and diversity of the opposition.

The Dynamics Between the Poles

Perhaps the most undertheorized aspect of politics under Chávez is the dynamic of polarization and opposition it has engendered. Some authors claim that, in moving to the left and employing aggressive language, the state is merely reflecting a polarized social structure. But this argument seems oblivious to the idea that extreme positions in politics are often the willing choice of politicians who see advantages in provoking rather than accommodating their opponents (see Márquez in Márquez and Piñango 2003; Weyland 2001; Cohen 1994). New theories drawing from evolutionary biology posit that in-groups need to 'construct', and 'initiate hostilities' toward, out-groups (Alford and Hibbing 2004, 710). The hypothesis that the Chávez government, like so many other governments elsewhere, might be interested in polarizing the polity for political gain needs more attention. Below I offer some lessons from the Venezuelan experience since 1999 to theorize about the dynamics of polarization.

1. The first step in the polarization process was a major *power grab* on the part of the new Chavista state-holders. A power grab consists of an expansion of control over crucial political institutions at the expense of political opponents. All transfers of powers after democratic elections involve some form of power grab by winners, but in Venezuela in 1999-2000, the power grab went far beyond what anyone had expected (Corrales 2005). The most blatant acts were: 1) the abrogation of most political institutions in which the opposition or independents (the National Congress, the judiciary) had a presence and their replacement with loyalists-packed

institutions (the National Constituent Assembly, the *Congresillo*), and 2) the enactment of an ultra-statist, anti-party, pro-military constitution with little representation by the opposition. These acts pointed in one direction: ‘the elimination of horizontal accountability’ (Coppedge 2003, 177). The origins of power grabs vary from country to country. In Venezuela, I examined various hypotheses: the new state holders had an extreme belief that parties needed to be punished, that concentrating state power would solve policy incoherence, or that this was their last chance to establish hegemony after the failure of their co-government during the Caldera administration. Maybe they were too inexperienced (given the number of newcomers) or simply convinced authoritarians (given the number of military and guerrilla men within the Chávez movement). Different groups in the Chavista coalition fell into each of these categories; some groups fit into all these categories. Whatever the reason, the consequences were enormous. The power grab was the polarization’s main trigger, because as Coppedge (2003) argued, it had a huge impact on the opposition.

2. The most significant impact that power grabs have on the opposition is to increase its insecurity and facilitate its unification, both of which help the opposition solve previous collective action problems. Consistent with the classic argument made by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), and reiterated more recently by rational-choice scholars (e.g., Weingast 2004), power grabs by state-holders increase the stakes of politics and the insecurity of those who do not control the state. Power grabs make those in the opposition feel more precarious than how they felt shortly after losing the more recent elections. Ideologically incompatible opposition groups, feeling equally cheated by the state, join forces to challenge the state. This heightened fear and sudden unification revive the opposition, which explains why Venezuela’s fragmented party system suddenly coalesced into a united front (the *Coordinadora Democrática*) that proved capable of organizing 19 massive marches, multiple *cacerolazos* (pot-bangings), and two signature-collection campaigns to force the government to carry out a recall referendum, all in the space of two years (González in Márquez and Piñango 2004). The resuscitated opposition might not agree on all tactics or even on a common leader, but its ability to carry out collective actions improves following large power grabs.

3. Power grabs also have a predictable effect on incumbent forces: soft-liners defect, causing a significant recomposition at the state level. In Venezuela, the ruling coalition suffered the defection of the MAS, numerous ministers, and many members of the National Assembly (Kelly in Márquez and Piñango 2003). By early 2003, the Chavista coalition’s share of seats in the National Assembly was 52.1 per cent, down from 65.5 per cent in 2000, all the product of defections. Sectors of the military, and more important, members of Chávez’s core constituency, the very poor, defected as well (Weyland 2001). In July 2003, support for Chávez among the lowest income group hovered around 39 per cent, down from 94 per cent at the start of the administration (Datanálisis 2003; Consultores21 2003). Incumbent defections of this magnitude have a huge effect on polarization: the opposition obtains new allies and new reasons to feel optimistic about their chance to unseat state-holders. At the same time, the incumbent feels increasingly insecure (as a result of its political shrinkage) and more inclined toward extremism (because those who once advocated moderation are leaving the coalition).

4. Extremism on each side becomes mutually reinforcing. Once the political system splits between an inflamed and revived opposition and a shrinking and less moderate incumbent force, each side experiences a spiralling sense of political threat. The opposition observes the incumbent taking increasingly more hard-core positions; the incumbents observe the opposition adopting increasingly obstructionist positions. Everyone confirms suspicions that adversaries are threatening. Each pole begins to consider extra-institutional actions. In Venezuela, the opposition participated in the coups of April 2002 and organized the oil strike of the winter of 2002-03. The incumbent, in turn, pursued further power grabs to maintain its hold on power (e.g., the illegal firing of 20,000 striking oil workers in 2003).

5. At some point, polarization results in some type of showdown – the state calls in the military to repress, the opposition decides to take up arms, or both sides work out an institutional solution. This is the most indeterminate step in the whole process. It's unclear which option will prevail: a repressive state, armed insurrection, or de-escalation (see Sambanis 2004). In Venezuela, the showdown became the political fight for the recall referendum between 2003 and 2004 (Kornblith 2005). At first, the state hesitated, but the opposition's mobilization together with international pressure compelled the state to carry out the referendum. Each side devoted huge resources to win this referendum. The state in particular launched a massive spending campaign. In the end, the opposition lost. Analysts have spent time thinking about the reasons for the government's victory. But an equally important question is why the opposition did not respond violently, when so many were convinced of fraud and unfairness. Instead, the opposition went into a peaceful retreat that has lasted to this day. Maybe it was exhaustion, demoralization, lack of international support, or the end of economic bad times that explains this retreat. Or maybe it was the nature of pole formation as outlined in step 2: power grabs lead to a coalition that is so ideologically diverse that it can only cooperate effectively for a short time, but not indefinitely. Or maybe it was a combination of all of the above. Whatever the cause, the sudden deflation of the opposition was indeterminate and cannot be explained easily with deductive rational choice arguments.

6. A power-grab may escalate even in calm waters. Another unexpected development in Venezuela was the state's decision to carry out further power grabs after the 2004 referendum. Rather than engage in a process of reconciliation, as some victors do, the incumbents in Venezuela responded to their 2004 electoral victory by escalating extremist acts of politics. The government drafted a new military doctrine to prepare the country against 'an asymmetrical war', hardened the crackdown on opposition leaders who participated in the protests of April 2002, embarked on the creation of two million urban reservists to help in the 'maintenance of internal order', expanded the presence of Cuban technical advisers from 20,000 to 50,000, reformed the criminal code to ban *cacerolazos* and other acts of disrespect against public officials, targeted more than 1,500 private properties for expropriation, etc. All these acts are polemical, to say the least, and highly threatening to the opposition.

This new round cannot be explained the same way that I explained the extremism of 2001-04. One explanation for the 2001-04 polarization is that it was the result of an unintentional interaction by actors stuck in a security dilemma: feeling insecure, each side took defensive and offensive steps that further increased the

insecurities of adversaries. Chávez's post-referendum power grab, on the other hand, is simply not a response to extremist or obstructionist acts by the opposition, since the opposition had never been tamer.

The remaining explanation for the post-2004 power grab is that it is deliberate, most likely because incumbents see it as functional. Perhaps the incumbents figure that the prevailing peace is their ultimate chance to lock in their hold on power. Or perhaps the incumbents have concluded that it pays to provoke the opposition because it serves to quell dissent within its ranks. This would be consistent with Cohen's (1994) argument that extreme, radical positions in politics are likely when politicians face excessive pressure from the radicals within their ranks and too much infighting among coalition members. These internal fissures resurfaced, perhaps not coincidentally, after the opposition retreated. Chávez may have been interested in reigniting the opposition's recalcitrance, even restore polarization, as a way to ease fissures within his coalition.

Polarization and the Middle

In studying polarization, scholars ought to focus not just on the poles, but also on the actors in the middle – those who do not have fixed allegiances to either pole. The middle is important because, in deciding their political strategies, each pole responds not only to what the other pole does (proposition 4), but also to the *size* of the middle. The middle may expand or shrink during polarization processes, but it never disappears completely. It could be hypothesized that the larger the middle, the more each pole hesitates to take extreme actions in fear of alienating the middle; or alternatively, the larger the middle, the higher the barriers to collective action for the opposition pole. For this reason, each pole has an incentive to shrink the middle by compelling those in it to gravitate toward its side. To shrink the middle, each pole faces two political options. One is to provoke the other pole into more extremist acts in the hope of persuading those in the middle that the other side is indeed monstrous. But this strategy may not work, in part because those in the middle may catch on to this trick. The alternative option is to win the middle through inducements. In this game, the state has the advantage, but whether the state prevails or not depends on the particular *composition* of the middle.

The composition of the middle is always heterogeneous; it includes actors who are cynical, conflicted, or simply apolitical. It also includes actors who swing their allegiances, either because they are politically opportunistic (responding to available political favours) or because they like to side with whichever pole appears more likely to win politically. It seems that the greater the size of the opportunistic sector within the middle, the greater the advantage for the state, since the state, relative to its societal opponents, has an absolute advantage in offering political favours. This is especially true for petro-states enjoying an oil boom, such as Venezuela since 2003.

It seems that in Venezuela, the size of the opportunistic sector in the middle was fairly large, which, together with the oil boom, might explain step 7. Starting in 2003, the Venezuelan state began to dispense enormous patronage 'goodies', aimed precisely at capturing the patronage- and rent-sensitive sector in the middle. This would explain the recovery of the Chavista camp in 2004. This would also explain the renewed extremism of the Chavista camp, and the retreat of the opposition, after 2004. Because so many voters in the middle shifted allegiances back to

the state in 2004, Venezuela experienced a shrinking of the middle in the direction of the state, leaving fewer reasons for the state to act with self-restraint, and simultaneously leaving the opposition hesitant about pursuing risky collective actions after 2004. In short, even in polarized politics, the middle never shrinks entirely, and the larger the number of opportunistic actors within the middle, the greater the advantage for the state.

Conclusion: Polarization and Its Implications for Venezuela's Democracy and the Study of Conflict Politics

The dynamics of polarization outlined here have implications for the study of Venezuelan politics and conflict politics in general. Venezuela is undergoing the classic democratizing struggle that typically follows regime collapse. The state has fallen under the control of a new majority that seems uninterested in self-restraint. As long as these state holders can continue to win more than 50 per cent of the vote (or keep abstention rates high enough) and undermine institutions of accountability, they will remain uninterested in self-restraint. Because of the more-than-doubling of oil prices since 2003, these state holders have found the money to achieve both electoral victories and institutional controls. The manipulation of institutions through populist spending and electoral majorities seems less like socialism of the 21st century than Latin American populism of the mid 20th century.

Future studies of Venezuelan politics ought to focus on the internal structure of the ruling coalition, the opposition, and the middle, and how their internal diversity serves to inflate polarized politics. In studying the ruling coalition, understanding the reasons that Chávez has failed to establish hegemonic control among the poor, and the impact that this political failure has on the ruling coalition, is likely to provide novel insights on the contemporary limits of populism and how these limits ignite polarization. In studying the opposition, this much we already know: Gott's assessment that 'the only serious opposition, apart from the columnists, has come from leaders of the once powerful economic groups' (p. 218), was never true. The opposition to Chávez since 2000 has been far larger and multi-sectoral. If anything, many powerful economic groups were Chavista in the beginning (because they were opportunistic), have turned Chavista after the 2004 referendum (because they need to survive), or have been Chavista all along (because they like protectionism).

The future of Venezuela's democracy will continue to depend on the future of the opposition's capacity to resist, as all students of social movements reiterate. And yet, the dilemma of Venezuela's opposition, or for that matter, of the opposition to any government that emerges from a frail regime, is that it comprises both true democrats and less committed democrats. The opposition always clamours for unity among its ranks, but perhaps it should not treat unity as such a categorical imperative. Complete unity is unsustainable and undesirable for the opposition. It is unsustainable because ideological differences are too vast. It is undesirable because trying to put under one umbrella groups with such different goals may result in confusion among leaders about appropriate strategies, and more devastatingly, among the electorate, which cannot easily discern what the opposition is really about. Piñango is right when he says that striving for complete unity could very well be Venezuela's 'dangerous new illusion' (Márquez and Piñango 2003, 26).

The implications of the Venezuelan case for the study of conflict politics are also worth highlighting. The field of political science is divided into four main

schools of thought: structuralism, constructivism, historical-institutionalism, and rational choice. Insofar as the process of polarization that I have just outlined is correct and generalizable, then focusing on only one of these four schools to study polarization is intellectually limiting. On its own, none of these approaches can explain the totality of the process. Whereas rational choice may sufficiently explain propositions 2, 3, and 4 (the rise of the opposition, the defection of softliners, and the escalation of extremism following major power grabs), it cannot easily explain the other propositions.

Understanding the 1999-2000 drastic power grab requires understanding the history, institutions, resources, and ideologies of the new ruling coalition. Likewise, the opposition's 2003 decision to focus on the referendum and then to retreat rather than to take up arms requires attention to the same factors as well as to international relations. The same could be said about the incumbent's 2004 decision to pursue more power grabs despite (or because of) calm waters. These factors are more profitably studied by drawing from structuralism, which is well qualified to explain the distribution of resources, by historic-institutionalism, which is well qualified to explain the availability of opportunities and allies, and by constructivism, which is well qualified to explain ideologies, rather than by relying exclusively on rational choice. The study of political polarization, consequently, cannot afford methodological and intellectual homogeneity.

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