From System Collapse to Chavista Hegemony

The Party Question in Bolivarian Venezuela

by
Gabriel Hetland

During the 14 years Hugo Chávez was in office, Venezuela's party system experienced a 180-degree shift. When Chávez was elected in 1998, Venezuela's party system had collapsed because of a two-decade-long economic-cum-political crisis. His initial appeal was built, in large part, on his antiparty message, a stance that continued through the first half of his time in office. A series of factors, principally the need for a more cohesive organization to combat an intransigent opposition, led to the creation of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela—PSUV) in 2007. The PSUV quickly became Venezuela's largest party and the linchpin of a new hegemonic system. The contradictions of that system are manifested in the split between the PSUV's right and left wings, and the hegemony of Chavismo is now in doubt.

Durante los 14 años de la presidencia de Hugo Chávez, el sistema de partidos de Venezuela sufrió un giro de 180°. Cuando Chávez fue elegido en 1998, el sistema ya había colapsado debido a la larga crisis económica y política que ya llevaba dos décadas. Su llamamiento inicial se fundamentó, en gran parte, en un mensaje antipartido, una postura que continuó durante la primera mitad de su mandato. Una serie de factores—principalmente, la necesidad de una organización más cohesiva para combatir a la oposición intransigente — llevó a la creación del Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) en 2007. El PSUV rápidamente se convirtió en el partido más grande de Venezuela y en la pieza esencial de un nuevo sistema hegemónico. Las contradicciones del sistema se manifiestan en la brecha entre el ala izquierdista y el ala derechista del PSUV y la hegemonía del chavismo ahora está en entredicho.

Keywords: *Venezuela, Political parties, Hugo Chávez, Chavismo, Hegemony*

Over the past 30 years, Venezuela's political system has experienced two fundamental shifts. The first shift occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when the party system, which had been viewed as one of the most stable in the region, experienced a sudden and total collapse. The second shift occurred between the late 1990s and mid-2000s as a new hegemonic system centered on the late Hugo Chávez came into being. The collapse of Venezuela's party system in the 1980s and 1990s can be traced to the prolonged economic-cum-political crisis triggered by the collapse of oil prices in the 1980s. The enviable political stability Venezuela achieved between the 1960s and 1980s, based on the country's system of "pacted democracy" (Karl, 1997), was undergirded by oil revenues,

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which made it possible to fund a relatively generous welfare state without directly threatening domestic elites (Dunning, 2008). The sharp drop in oil revenues in the course of the 1980s undermined the material and political foundations of this system, bringing it and the two parties that anchored it down (Ellner and Tinker Salas, 2007).

This set the stage for Hugo Chávez's dramatic rise in the late 1990s. In addition to his rejection of neoliberalism, Chávez's initial appeal centered on his distance from and stinging critique of Venezuela's political establishment, which was responsible for the implementation of neoliberalism in the 1990s. Chávez's antiparty stance continued during the first half of his time in office, which began in 1999. Through 2006, the numerous electoral campaigns Chávez engaged in—on behalf of himself, his allies, and his agenda—were channeled through the Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement—MVR), which was consciously set up as a political "movement" rather than a party. Chávez's attitude toward parties shifted in the wake of a series of unsuccessful attempts to remove him from office between 2002 and 2004. Following his landslide reelection in 2006, Chávez initiated the process of forming the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela—PSUV), which brought together most of the political parties supporting him.

The PSUV quickly became Venezuela's largest political party and the anchor of a new hegemonic system. In addition to its electoral predominance, the hegemony of Chavismo between 2005 and 2012 can be seen in the extensive links connecting the Venezuelan state and the PSUV to civil society and the anti-Chavista opposition's eventual acceptance (at least through 2013) of many of the basic tenets of Chavismo. In addition to the conflict between Chavismo and the opposition, the intensity of which has followed a cyclical pattern over the years, the future of post-Chávez Venezuela depends on the divisions within Chavismo. The principal division, which roughly corresponds to the split between the PSUV's left and right wings, pits the popular sectors and radical forces inside and outside the state and ruling party against the state and party bureaucracy, conservative military generals, and the new economic elite. Chávez's death in 2013 and the fall in the price of oil in 2014 have precipitated a new crisis of hegemony within Venezuela, visible in the PSUV's devastating loss in the 2015 parliamentary election.

THE RISE AND FALL OF PACTED DEMOCRACY

From the late 1950s through 1980s, Venezuela's oil wealth undergirded a system of pacted democracy—formally enshrined in the 1958 Pact of Punto Fijo, which included three of the four major parties in Venezuela, with the Communist Party excluded—that produced an enviable degree of domestic peace and political stability in a region rife with military dictatorships (Collier and Collier, 1991; Karl, 1997). Venezuela was never a classless society, but a generous welfare state, alongside a historically weak working class, landed oligarchy, and domestic capitalist class, led to the emergence of the region's largest and most affluent middle class. Between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, the state's revenues declined dramatically, above all because of the drop in the global price of oil

TABLE 1
Combined AD/COPEI Vote and Turnout (%) in Venezuelan Presidential Elections, 1958–1998

Year	*Vote*	*Turnout*
1958	65.4	94.4
1963	53.0	92.3
1968	57.3	96.7
1973	85.4	96.5
1978	89.9	87.6
1983	91.9	87.3
1988	93.3	81.9
1993	46.3	60.2
1998	2.82/39.97[a]	63.5

Source: http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/documentos/estadisticas/e006.pdf.
a. AD/COPEI switched their support to Henrique Salas Romer days before the election; before this the parties supported Irene Sáez, who finished third with 2.82%.

from the mid-1980s on. This led to steep cuts in state spending on health and education (Dunning, 2008: 163, 187). On February 27, 1989, Venezuela's image as a beacon of stability was shattered by the Caracazo, a five-day nationwide urban explosion triggered by a secret deal signed by President Andrés Pérez with the International Monetary Fund that substantially increased the price of gasoline and eliminated fuel subsidies (Coronil, 1997).

The military was called upon to crush the uprising, leading to hundreds of civilian deaths. This horrified Hugo Chávez and the junior military officers who joined his 1992 coup attempt. These events were midpoints of an economic and political crisis that started in the early 1980s and lasted through the late 1990s (Kelly and Palma, 2004; McCoy, 2004). Continuously falling oil prices and the Latin American debt crisis led to plummeting wages and formal employment, decimating Venezuela's vaunted middle class. By 1995 poverty had reached 66 percent, and by 1999 53 percent of employment was in the informal sector (Roberts, 2003: 59–60). This catastrophic economic situation was mirrored in the political sphere. Support for Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and COPEI (Social Christian Party), the two parties that had dominated Venezuelan politics since the Pact of Punto Fijo, fell throughout the 1990s (Morgan, 2011), setting the stage for Chávez's 1998 election as president.

FROM "¡QUE SE VAYAN TODOS!" TO A NEW HEGEMONIC SYSTEM

The phrase "¡Que se vayan todos!" (Get rid of them all!) was popularized in Argentina, but the anti-incumbent/antiparty message behind it was common to a number of Latin American countries in the 1990s, including Venezuela. The electoral results and voter turnout for Venezuelan presidential elections from 1958 to 1998 (Table 1) document the magnitude and suddenness of the political crisis that affected Venezuela in the 1990s. Acción Democrática and COPEI dominated Venezuelan politics for most of this period; in the 1970s and 1980s

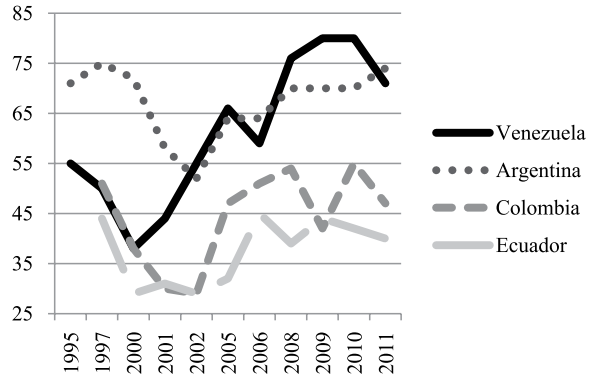

Figure 1. Support for parties (percentage agreeing that "without political parties there can be no democracy"), select countries, 1995–2011 (data from Latinaobarómetro, 1995–2013).

the two parties' electoral dominance was almost total. From 1958 until 1973 voter turnout was close to 100 percent, and it exceeded 80 percent through 1988. By the early 1990s, with the memory of the Caracazo and the state's bloody response still fresh, it was clear that Venezuela's political system was in disarray. There were two coup attempts in 1992, one led by Chávez. In 1993, for the first time since the restoration of democracy in 1958, a party other than Acción Democrática or COPEI won the presidential election. The combined vote total of AD and COPEI in the 1993 election was less than half what it had been in 1988 and for the first time ever was under 50 percent. Voter turnout in 1993 reached a historic (and, by Venezuelan standards, abysmally) low figure of 60.2 percent. By 1998, the year Chávez was elected, the collapse of Venezuela's party system was complete, with AD/COPEI registering almost no electoral support. (Having failed to field a viable candidate of their own, both parties belatedly supported the second-place finisher, Henrique Romer Salas; if anything, this probably hurt his chances.)

As a consummate political outsider, Chávez benefited from the anti-party/antiestablishment mood that swept Venezuela in the 1990s. In 1998 and for a number of years thereafter, Chávez was supported by the MVR, which Venezuelan commentators argue was not a political party but merely an electoral vehicle for Chávez and his agenda. His suspicion of parties continued after he took office, and he made little effort to institutionalize the MVR. For many campaigns he set up parallel structures that to a large extent bypassed it; an example of this was the formation of the Ayacucho and Maisanta "Commands" that led the "No" campaign in the 2004 recall referendum.

Chávez's antipathy toward parties dissipated over the years. This mirrors (and is likely at least in part a consequence of) the overall trend in Venezuela. Venezuelans' support for parties declined between 1995 (the first year of the Latinobarómetro [1995–2013] survey) and 2000, Chávez's second year in office, when it reached a low of 38 percent (Figure 1). Thereafter, support grew steadily, reaching 66 percent in 2005 and (following a slight dip in 2006) climbing to a high of 80 percent in 2009 and 2010. The pattern found in Venezuela—decreasing support for parties through the late 1990s and early 2000s and increasing

support through the mid-to-late 2000s—also occurred in several other Latin American countries. Chávez's decision to replace the MVR with the PSUV in 2007 should be seen in this context.

The formation of the PSUV must also be seen in the context of the fierce opposition Chávez faced from Venezuelan elites between 2001 and 2004, which may, in fact, be the most significant factor behind it. While many elites were wary of Chávez from the beginning, elite opposition took off following a series of 49 decrees he issued in November 2001, the most significant of which involved land reform and changes in Venezuela's all-important oil sector. Chávez's attempt in early 2002 to exert greater state control over Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)—Venezuela's state-owned oil company, which was quasi-privatized in the 1990s and widely viewed as a "state within the state"—set off further opposition and was a leading cause of the April 2002 coup that removed him from office for 47 hours. This was followed by a two-month management-led oil strike in 2002–2003 and a 2004 recall referendum. These efforts failed to remove Chávez from office permanently but inflicted considerable damage on Venezuela's economy.

In part because of the looseness of the MVR, Chávez had engaged in some efforts to organize his supporters, particularly in the popular sectors, in the early years of his administration. In 2000 he called on his supporters to form Bolivarian circles, and hundreds were created in the next several years (Hawkins and Hansen, 2006). In 2001 his administration began to encourage the formation of *mesas técnicas de agua* (technical water round tables) (McMillan and Spronk, 2013). The majority and arguably the most important of these efforts occurred, however, during and (especially) following the height of the conflict between Chávez and Venezuelan elites. The reason for this is no mystery: during the April 2002 coup and in the years that followed, the popular sectors repeatedly rose up to defend Chávez, in many cases spontaneously (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013). His subsequent efforts to organize them represented an attempt to construct a popular bulwark against future elite efforts to destabilize his administration. In February 2002 Chávez issued a decree legalizing the formation of urban land committees. In 2003, in conjunction with Barrio Adentro (the first of numerous social missions sponsored by the administration), hundreds (and eventually thousands) of health committees were formed. In April 2006, the National Assembly passed the Law of Communal Councils, and in subsequent years thousands of communal councils were formed throughout Venezuela (Ellner, 2008). Since 2009 the state has promoted communes, which conjoin geographically adjacent communal councils for larger projects.

The 2007 formation of the PSUV represented another of Chávez's efforts to organize the popular sectors and, in particular, to do so by constructing a political organization that would be more solid and cohesive—and thus more strategically useful—than the MVR. Steve Ellner (2008: 127) argues that the formation of the PSUV represented an effort to tackle several pressing problems facing Chavismo: the MVR's excessive electoralism and lack of solid links to civil society, continuing resentment of parties among grassroots Chavistas because of the perceived opportunism of their leaders, and widespread concern (among Chavistas) about rampant corruption, especially at the local level. As Ellner mentions, Chávez cited the MVR's failure to confront corruption as

one of the reasons for forming the PSUV. Another factor was Chávez's desire to unite the various political forces in support of Chavismo.

The formation of the PSUV can be traced to the 2006 presidential election, which Chávez handily won with nearly 63 percent of the vote. This commanding victory provided him with significant political capital not only with respect to the opposition but vis-à-vis his allies and supporters as well. This was important because some of the parties that had supported him in the past, such as Patria para Todos (Fatherland for Everyone—PPT), the Communist Party, and Por la Democracia Social (For Social Democracy—Podemos), resisted his urging to disband and join the PSUV, although some of their leaders (e.g., Aristóbulo Istúriz of the PPT) did so. It is also worth mentioning that the formation of the PSUV occurred at a time when Chávez was trying to clarify the political-ideological objectives of his project, having declared himself a socialist (of the twenty-first century) in 2005. The MVR had been criticized for its lack of ideological clarity (Ellner, 2008). The formation of the PSUV offered Chávez a chance to rectify this problem, which he proposed to do by holding an "ideological congress" in which the PSUV would clarify its positions. An "extraordinary" ideological congress was in fact held in 2009–2010, and Nicolás Maduro held an "ordinary" ideological congress to continue the process in July 2014.

The formation of the PSUV occurred during the period when Chavista hegemony was being consolidated. While the party is not synonymous with Chavismo or Chavista hegemony, it has played an important role in this new hegemonic system.

CHAVISTA HEGEMONY

Following Gramsci (1971), I define hegemony as a set of institutionalized political "rules of the game" that (1) is based on the articulation of a universalistic political project that (2) has succeeded in becoming taken-for-granted (i.e., something that cannot be ignored and is unlikely to be challenged) by the main contenders in a given political arena, (3) provides a relatively durable link between political elites and nonelites and (4) the state and civil society, and (5) is materially underpinned and structured by the relative and absolute size of a country's economic surplus and the particular way the state (indirectly or directly) orchestrates the collection and (re)distribution of this economic surplus. On the basis of this definition, it is clear that by the 1990s there was an absence of hegemony in Venezuela. This was, as we have seen, a period of economic and political crisis, with low (and in several years negative) growth, declining state revenues and spending on health and education, rising poverty and falling wages, and, on the political front, decreasing electoral turnout and declining support for democracy and political parties. Most of these processes were linked to falling oil prices from the mid-1980s on.

Chávez's 1998 election did not lead to the immediate reestablishment of hegemony in Venezuela. Like many newly elected leaders, he enjoyed a high approval rating, nearly 92 percent, just after he took office, but the period from 2001 to 2004 was quite challenging for him. In 2002 and 2003, when opposition intransigence was at its height and oil prices remained low (the two being

TABLE 2
Chávez Vote and Turnout (%), Venezuelan Presidential Elections, 1998–2012

Year	*Vote*	*Turnout*
1998	56.2	63.46
2000	59.76	56.31
2004[a]	59.10	69.92
2006	62.84	74.69
2012	55.07	80.49

Source: http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/estadisticas/index_resultados_elecciones.php.
[a]Recall/referendum.

related, as Dunning [2008] shows), Chávez's approval rating (as measured by the Venezuelan polling firm Datanalisis) was in the mid-to-low 30s.[1] It was not until late 2004 that it rose above 50 percent. It continued to rise, staying in the 60–70 percent range, through 2007 and did not dip below 50 percent until late 2009. Not coincidentally, oil prices were high from 2003 through 2008, during the height of Chávez's popularity. Increased state revenues due to higher oil prices can thus be seen as providing the material base for Chavista hegemony. It is important, however, to note that Chávez had access to oil revenues—which was critical to increased state spending on health and education—because he had succeeded in reasserting state control over PDVSA in the aftermath of the oil strike. This allowed him to pursue a set of policies that sharply reduced poverty and inequality (Weisbrot, Ray, and Sandoval, 2009), helping to make Venezuela what the United Nations called the most equitable country in Latin America by 2012 (UNHSP, 2012).

INDICATORS: ELECTORAL AND PUBLIC OPINION DATA

In addition to Chávez's approval rating, a variety of indicators suggest that Chavismo had become hegemonic by roughly 2005. He scored a commanding victory in the 2004 recall referendum, with 59 percent of voters expressing a desire to keep him in office. Because of the opposition's strategically disastrous decision to boycott the 2005 parliamentary election, the National Assembly was almost completely controlled by Chavista parties between 2005 and 2010 (notwithstanding the defection of some Chavista legislators to the opposition during this time). In the 2006 presidential election, Chávez achieved his highest vote total ever, with nearly 63 percent of the vote. Further indicators that hegemony had been reestablished by the mid-2000s are the rising support for parties and the steady increase in voter turnout in presidential elections from 2000 on (Table 2). In Chávez's last election, in 2012, voter turnout topped 80 percent, the highest figure since 1988; significantly, in 1988 voting was mandatory, while in 2012 it was not (mandatory voting having been eliminated in 1993).Another quantitative indicator consistent with the thesis that Chavismo became hegemonic around 2004–2005 and stayed hegemonic through Chávez's death is the increase in Venezuelans' interest in politics from 2003 on (Figure 2). From 1995 until 2003 (with the exception of 2000), Venezuelans' interest in politics was below or roughly the same as the relatively low Latin American

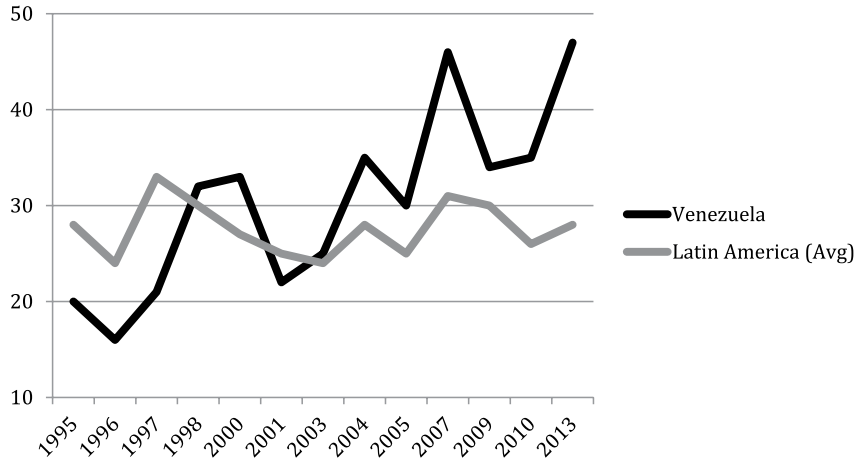

Figure 2. Interest in politics (percentage answering "very" or "somewhat" to "Are you interested in politics?"), Venezuela and Latin America, 1995–2013.

average. Since 2004 Venezuela's score on this measure has consistently been above the Latin American average, in several years (e.g., 2007, 2013) considerably so. In 2013 Venezuela had the highest interest in politics of all Latin American countries, at 47 percent. This figure is markedly higher than Venezuela's score in the mid-to-late 1990s and the period from 2001 to 2003.

REESTABLISHING THE LINK BETWEEN THE STATE/RULING PARTY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In addition to electoral and survey data, qualitative data also support the thesis that Chavismo became hegemonic in the mid-2000s. One of the main ways in which this occurred was through the strengthening of the bonds between the state/ruling party and civil society. In the 1990s this bond had weakened considerably, in conjunction with Venezuelans' declining support for political parties. According to Fernando Giuliani of the Centro Gumilla (a Venezuelan NGO), "This [the 1990s] was a long decade in which identification with parties diminished." This was in contrast to an earlier period, from the 1950s/1960s to the 1980s, when "[parties], and Acción Democrática in particular, had influence because the parties had experience organizing in communities and they had interesting leaders." The MVR failed to reestablish a link between the state and civil society. In Giuliani's and many other commentators' eyes, this is connected to the fact that the MVR was not a party: "Chavez governed without a party for a long time. . . . The MVR was just an electoral machine" (interview, Caracas, December 14, 2010).

The PSUV, by contrast, appears to have created much more solid links to civic associations. The creation of numerous state-sponsored civic associations——health committees, communal councils, and communes—from 2003 on facilitated this task. Critics argue that the relationship between the state/ruling party and civic associations became *too close*, with the latter losing their autonomy. According to Jesús Machado, also of the Centro Gumilla, "The

government expressly instrumentalizes communal councils [in the belief that] . . . communal councils are formed by the president and so they should be loyal to him." Machado says that this effort has not fully succeeded: "We have evidence that people want to keep the two spaces separate. They are with the PSUV and support the president, but they tell us that they want communal councils to concentrate on community issues" (interview, Caracas, December 14, 2010).

This is consistent with the results of eight months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the municipalities of Torres (in Lara state) and Sucre (in Miranda) between August 2007 and May 2011. In both Torres, which since 2004 has been controlled by a radical left party (and since 2007 a radical left faction of the PSUV) led by Julio Chávez, and Sucre, I found that some state officials and some ordinary citizens sought to exclude non-Chavistas and, in the case of Sucre (where the opposition was in office), Chavistas from government benefits. But in both cases I found numerous examples of communal councils in which Chavistas, opposition activists, and unaffiliated citizens (so-called *ninis*) all participated. My research supports the picture drawn by Jesús Machado. There are substantial links connecting the state and PSUV to organized communities. While there is considerable pressure from certain state institutions (in particular Fundacomunal) to practice a more exclusionary politics, the situation at the grassroots is more inclusionary.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ANTI-CHÁVEZ OPPOSITION

A second significant qualitative indicator of Chavista hegemony is the increasing acceptance by important factions of the opposition of some of the basic tenets of Chavismo from 2005 on. (Not coincidentally, this is arguably the year when Chavismo became hegemonic.) As has Chavismo, the opposition has often been caricatured. To Western governments and mainstream media outlets it represents the sole force of reason in a country gone mad. In this narrative, Henrique Capriles Radonski is a would-be Lula (during his heyday) who can restore democracy to Venezuela. This view conveniently ignores the fact that the opposition—including Capriles's party, Primero Justicia (Justice First)—supported a violent coup that overthrew a democratically elected president. For Chavistas and Chávez's supporters in the international left, the 2002 coup is the key event that defines the opposition. In their view, the opposition is an elitist, reactionary force that is not only implacably opposed to Chavismo but willing to use antidemocratic, even fascist means to return Venezuela to the glory years of the Punto Fijo era, when elites could do as they pleased and the masses were well-fed and silent.

Neither of these views does justice to the fractious coalition of diverse forces that opposed Chávez. This coalition includes parties such as Bandera Roja, which comes from a revolutionary socialist tradition, and a reactionary landed elite that has murdered more than 250 peasant leaders since Venezuela passed a land reform law in 2001 (Boothroyd, 2011). Through 2005, the opposition's reactionary wing predominated. It rejected the legitimacy of Chávez and the social grievances he claimed to speak to, and its strategy was implacable hostility toward Chavismo in all its forms. This led to the 2002 coup, the 2002–2003 oil

strike, the 2004 recall referendum against Chávez, and the opposition's boycott of the 2005 parliamentary elections. Ironically, the chief result of this strategy was to strengthen Chávez and deepen his commitment to popular empowerment and organization.

From 2005 on, a more forward-looking vision began to take hold within the opposition. According to Miguel Contreras of the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Acción Democrática was the leading party within the opposition through 2005 and the main force pushing for a boycott of the 2005 election (interview, September 28, 2010). Thereafter AD's fortunes waned (though they have since recovered to some extent), and newer parties such as Un Nuevo Tiempo (A New Time) and Primero Justicia gathered strength. Since 2008 Primero Justicia has been the most dynamic opposition party. It advocated participating in the 2005 parliamentary election and has argued that the opposition should use rather than reject the tools of Chavismo. Primero Justicia activists say that they recognize many of the ills of the so-called Fourth Republic (Chávez's term for the Punto Fijo era). They even accept some of the Chavista solutions to these ills, though they remain committed to neoliberalism and certain socially conservative stances (such as rejecting abortion). Rather than condemning the communal councils as a communist plot to turn Venezuela into Cuba, Primero Justicia encouraged opposition activists to organize their own. The party now defends the 1999 constitution, and in the 2012 and 2013 presidential campaigns Capriles said that he would maintain the government's social missions if elected. Critics, however, note that the opposition parties have all signed pledges to privatize PDVSA if elected, and many doubt that the opposition would in fact continue Chavista-type policies to any significant extent if it were to win national power.

Primero Justicia has, however, implemented "Chavista" policies at the local level. In Sucre municipality, which the party has governed since 2008, it has implemented a participatory budget that allows local residents to decide how to spend 40 percent of the municipality's investment funds. Compared with the participatory budgeting in cities run by radical left parties such as Porto Alegre, Brazil, during the years of Workers' Party rule and Torres, there are important limits to Sucre's participatory budget: turnout has been somewhat low, and the quality of deliberation is mixed. It has, however, given ordinary citizens, including many Chavistas (who by 2011 formed a majority of participants in many of Sucre's participatory budgeting assemblies), a significant degree of control over local political decision making. Other opposition-run municipalities have also implemented participatory budgeting in recent years. In addition to the fact that leading opposition figures such as Capriles have adopted Chavista rhetoric and proposals, this development is a powerful indicator of the hegemony of Chavismo in this period.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CHAVISMO

Like the opposition, Chavismo is far from monolithic. Providing a full analysis of its contradictions would require paying more attention to the historical origins and diverse perspectives of the various popular movements and political

parties that supported Chávez than is possible here. Fortunately, others have taken on this task (Ellner, 2013a; 2013b; Lander and López Maya, 2011). One of the insights of this scholarship is that the grassroots support for Chávez was often much more critical than mainstream portrayals of Chavistas would lead one to believe (Azzellini, 2011; Ciccariello-Maher, 2013; Fernandes, 2010; García-Guadilla, 2011; Smilde, 2011). This section seeks to shed some light on the contradictions of Chavismo by examining the distinct social bases of Chavismo and the (related) split between the left, right, and moderate wings of the PSUV.

THE SOCIAL BASES OF CHAVISMO

The urban poor constituted Chávez's primary support base, voting for him consistently and turning out at critical moments such as the 2002 coup, when hundreds of thousands of Chavistas from barrios across Caracas surrounded Miraflores (the presidential palace) to demand his return. He also received consistent support from the rural poor, and in the case of other Chavista candidates they proved to be even more consistent supporters than the urban poor. These two sectors have been the critical force in Venezuela's grassroots social movements and form the base of the PSUV, which has nearly 8 million members, 2.5 million of whom voted in the party's 2010 primary (Fuentes, 2010).

Chávez's relationship to organized labor was significantly more complicated (Ellner, 2013b). As unionization declined in the 1980s, Venezuela's main trade union federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (Venezuelan Workers' Confederation—CTV), became increasingly disconnected from the concerns of ordinary Venezuelans and came to represent the interests of a "labor aristocracy" (Roberts, 2003: 61). Early in his presidency, Chávez clashed frequently with the CTV, which was historically closely tied to AD and supported the 2002 coup. The pro-Chávez Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Workers' Union—UNETE), formed in 2003, has a number of competing currents, some of which are strongly supportive of worker control and socialism while others tend toward more economistic demands. Despite its support for Chávez (which leads some to view it as an "official" union federation), the UNETE has shown its willingness to clash with the government on a number of occasions.

Military generals, especially retired ones, have played key roles in the PSUV and the state as ministers and elected officials. Nine of the 20 PSUV governors elected in December 2012 were former generals. These generals have often been associated with what is called the "endogenous right" within Chavismo. The PSUV's right wing also includes the *boliburguesía* (Bolivarian bourgeoisie), entrepreneurs who grew rich through government contracts and members of the state bureaucracy who have profited illicitly from their positions. Chavismo is supported by some of the (lower) middle class, but except in Chávez's brief honeymoon period middle-class professionals and the upper classes have strongly supported the opposition (Lupu, 2010).[2]

THE DIVISIONS WITHIN THE PSUV

The PSUV is divided into right, left, and moderate wings. Hard data on the relationship between the PSUV's social bases and party factions are hard to

come by (in part because the PSUV's three wings are not officially recognized), but in the eyes of some PSUV activists (and commentators in Venezuela and the United States) it appears that the popular sectors, particularly those organized into grassroots movements, tend to favor the party's left while the generals, the state bureaucracy, and the boliburguesía favor its right and moderate wings. There are clear ideological and strategic differences among these wings regarding worker control and confronting vs. accommodating capital, extending vs. restraining popular power, confronting vs. accommodating issues of bureaucratization and corruption within the state (and the military), and achieving ideological clarity vs. maintaining unity.

All three of the PSUV's wings are committed to a few goals. The most important goal is national sovereignty, which is probably the central ideological plank of Chavismo. This means support for a multipolar world, rejection of dependence upon the United States, and national control over strategic economic resources, particularly oil. The second key plank is the rejection of a free-market vision of development. All sectors of the PSUV favor at least some degree of state regulation and control over the economy and favor using the state's resources (in particular oil) to benefit the country's poor through social programs. Finally, there is a rhetorical commitment by everyone in the party to popular power and socialism, though there are sharp differences between the party's right and left wings over what this commitment should mean in practice.

A key figure in the "endogenous right"[3] is Diosdado Cabello, a former general and the speaker of the National Assembly, who is widely viewed as a rival of Maduro. Another is Luis Reyes Reyes, governor of Lara from 2000 to 2008, where he fiercely opposed Julio Chávez's radical politics in Torres. Cabello was governor of Miranda from 2004 to 2008 before losing to Henrique Capriles in the 2008 election. Grassroots Chavistas in Lara and Miranda were highly critical of both men, whom many viewed as corrupt and inefficient.

Prior to his defection to the opposition in 2010, another leader of the PSUV's endogenous right was Henri Falcón. As governor of Lara, Reyes Reyes was close to Falcón, who was a key figure in the MVR/PSUV's pro-business faction. Falcón was mayor of Barquisimeto (the capital of Lara and Venezuela's fourth-largest city) from 2000 to 2008 before becoming governor of Lara in 2008. Reyes Reyes supported Falcón over Julio Chávez's insurgent campaign in the PSUV primary that year. Falcón was known as a "Chavista lite" because of his support for private enterprise. He was the principal exponent of the idea of "efficient revolution," which was his campaign slogan. As mayor and governor he maintained close links to capital, fostering the construction of a large commercial center in Barquisimeto owned by the Venezuelan construction giant Sambil. Because of Julio Chávez's unremitting criticism and his own questioning of the Bolivarian Revolution, Falcón left the PSUV in 2010 and tried, with limited success, to forge a "third way" between Chavismo and the opposition. (Ironically, he beat Reyes Reyes in the 2012 gubernatorial race in Lara.)

The endogenous right is characterized by accommodation with capital, rejection of any serious attempt to move toward socialism or infringe upon property rights, opposition to worker control and to participatory democratic control over state decision making, and a preference for managerial/technocratic decision making. Its generals in particular are seen as being more corrupt and more apt

to engage in patronage politics. Because of his desire to maintain party unity, Hugo Chávez was tolerant (if not entirely supportive) of this wing.

From the time the PSUV was formed, some of its members advocated a much more confrontational attitude toward capital and the party's right wing. In the fall of 2010 a serious but ultimately unsuccessful effort was made to organize these forces into an official radical left current within the party. One of the key figures behind this effort was Eduardo Samán, who was the director of the Institute for the Protection of People's Right to Access Goods and Services and served as minister of commerce from March 2009 to February 2010. In these roles he was popular with grassroots Chavistas in the popular sectors because of his willingness to confront capital head-on. As commerce minister, Samán implemented stricter price controls on basic goods. He also supported the establishment of worker control at the La Gaviota sardine factory near the city of Cumaná. His radicalism was too much for agro-industry, and in February 2010 Chávez dismissed him from the government. In a 2010 interview he said that the most likely reason for this dismissal was a secret agreement whereby agro-industrial firms would not create food shortages in exchange for his head. Since 2010 was an important election year, Chávez was susceptible to such pressure. Samán's replacement as commerce minister earned the praise of agro-industry for allowing increases in the price of butter, tomatoes, and other basic food products, something he said he would never have allowed (Lucha de Clases, 2010). Other key figures in the formation of the radical current were Víctor Álvarez, former minister of basic industries, Gonzalo Gómez, one of the founders of Aporrea.org (the most important grassroots Chavista web site), Julio Chávez, former mayor of Torres and currently a national deputy for the PSUV, and Stalin Pérez Borges, a member of the radical left group Marea Socialista (Socialist Tide) and a leader of the UNETE.

During its brief existence the radical left current pushed to "radicalize the revolution." It emphasized that its goal was not to divide the party but to confront bureaucracy and corruption, which radical leftists see as the main obstacles to the advance of a revolutionary process in Venezuela. It advocated strengthening the popular sectors within Chavismo through worker control and participatory democratic forms of decision making, holding up Torres's participatory budget as an example of what this looked like in practice. The radical left current was also a consistent advocate of internal party democracy. In the spring of 2013 there was a grassroots campaign in support of Samán's effort to become the PSUV's candidate for mayor of Caracas. The PSUV's top brass appeared to oppose this effort, and party leaders insisted that they would choose the candidate for this post, which is seen as strategically important. Following Maduro's election as president, Samán returned to favor, being named president of the institute in June 2013. In this post he continued his aggressive actions against price gouging and corruption within the agency. This, however, seems to have ruffled some feathers, and he lost some of his authority in July 2013 after his dismissal of several regional heads. In January 2015 Maduro reshuffled his cabinet, merging the institute with the National Superintendency for Fair Costs and Prices. Samán was not made head of the merged agency, and at the time of this writing his future role was unclear (Mallet-Outtrim, 2014).

While discussion of the need for a radical left current had been going on for years (even within the MVR), it was not until November 2010 that the radical left current went public. On November 25, 2010, Aporrea.org sponsored a public forum in Caracas that was attended by over 150 people, with Julio Chávez, Víctor Álvarez, Gónzalo Gómez, Stalin Pérez Borges, and others speaking. The main themes touched upon were the need to confront bureaucracy and corruption and strengthen popular power and worker control as the key mechanisms for making socialism more than just a slogan. Julio Chávez shared his experience as mayor of Torres, arguing that despite opposition from higher-ups in Lara, the electoral success that he and his successor had achieved while fostering radical policies and taking a confrontational stance toward the landed elite and party leaders demonstrated the wisdom of his practice. Stalin Pérez Borges spoke of the fear that unless the party led an effort to confront bureaucratism and corruption, the bases would lose faith in the process, something that he argued could be seen in the PSUV's disappointing performance in the September 2010 parliamentary election.

To the surprise and dismay of many, Samán, who had been the chief supporter of the radical left current, was not present at this forum. He also stopped speaking in favor of a radical left current around this time. Speculation about why pointed clearly to Chávez, who had expressed his opposition to the current's formation on several occasions, including on live television the Sunday before the forum took place. Many at the forum therefore assumed that Chávez must have called Samán and pressured him not to attend. Without Samán's support and in the face of Chávez's opposition, the radical left current did not survive into 2011. Chávez's opposition was not based on an ideological critique of the positions put forward by the radical left current. Rather, he argued that the formation of currents was a danger to party unity. In his eyes, the principal conflict was still with the opposition, and therefore anything that weakened the party's unity had to be suppressed. Maduro has been even more concerned with maintaining party unity. Unfortunately, he and those around him (e.g., Cabello) have shown little tolerance for dissent within Chavismo. While many see a continuing need for a radical left current (above all to confront scandalous corruption in the state), the chances of its development appear slim.

The case of Torres, a municipality of 200,000 in the state of Lara, illustrates the experience of the radical left in local power. Starting in 2005, Torres has implemented one of the most radical participatory budgets in the world, with residents deciding how to spend 100 percent of the city's investment funds. This process occurs through community and district assemblies held throughout Torres in which ordinary citizens discuss and vote upon their priorities. The results of these assemblies are binding. As Torres's mayor, Julio Chávez, explained in 2007, "The mayor can't even veto these decisions." The story of how this happened is illustrative of the complex dynamics between state-centric and grassroots forces of change in Chávez-era Venezuela (Ellner, 2008).

Julio Chávez (unrelated to Hugo), a rabble-rousing Marxist and former student activist, had been elected mayor in 2004. During one of several conversations I had with him he said that his only campaign promise had been to build popular power. He was (and is) fervently committed to the "Bolivarian Revolution" but had won office by running against the official Chavista

establishment. In addition to the Catholic Church and the landed elite, he faced considerable resistance from Torres's city council, which had a Chavista majority but refused to approve the city's participatory budget. He and his supporters responded by physically occupying City Hall and refusing to leave until the participatory budget was approved. This did not endear him to the local or regional political elites, but Torres's participatory budget made a favorable impression on President Chávez, who in 2006 named Julio Chávez to his Presidential Commission on Popular Power (the only mayor to receive this distinction).

The ultimately unsuccessful effort to form a radical left current illustrates the difference between radical leftists and moderates within the PSUV. Moderates like Chávez and Maduro seem to agree with at least some of the positions taken by radical leftists, but for them maintaining unity takes precedence over what radicals see as the party's priority: confronting capital and the state bureaucracy. This difference, which is about strategy more than underlying values, is what explains Chávez's willingness to tolerate corruption on the part of generals and others. He spoke frequently of the need to confront corruption and bureaucracy, but he failed to make a serious effort to weed out these problems. Such an effort would have led to a confrontation with powerful groups within the state, and this was a risk that he was not willing to take. He also felt intensely loyal to former military leaders like Cabello and Reyes Reyes who had stood by him during the 2002 coup.

Moderates and those from the party's right wing make up the vast majority of the party's national leadership. It is difficult to know the precise weight of these groups, but together they probably account for a solid majority of the party's governorships and the overwhelming majority of the PSUV's national directorate. The radical left current is extremely weak at the national leadership level, though several of its members, such as Julio Chávez, do hold positions of prominence. Julio Chávez is a PSUV national deputy and beginning in 2011 served as the vice president of the National Assembly's Permanent Commission on Popular Power and the Media. Among the members of the party's base the radical left position appears to have greater support, though precisely how much is unclear. Whether the effort to form a radical left current resumes under Maduro is likely to prove critical to extending worker control and popular participation in post-Chávez Venezuela. Grassroots efforts to achieve these goals are likely to continue, but without support from within the state and the party they are not likely to overcome the resistance of capital and the state bureaucracy.

POST-CHÁVEZ VENEZUELA: ECONOMIC CRISIS, THE EROSION OF CHAVISTA HEGEMONY, AND OPPOSITION INFIGHTING

Hugo Chávez's death in March 2013 led to a new, post-Chávez though for the present not yet post-Chavista phase in Venezuelan politics. This phase has been marked by an escalation of political conflict, a mounting economic crisis, and the steady erosion of popular support for the government and the PSUV. The hegemony of Chavismo is now very much in doubt. The clearest symbol

of this is the PSUV's devastating loss in the December 2015 parliamentary elections, when the opposition secured a two-thirds supermajority.

Nicolás Maduro's election as president in April 2013, a month after Chávez's death, provided a first, positive answer to the question "Can there be Chavismo without Chávez?" Maduro's margin of victory (50.6 percent to 49.1 percent), however, was much closer than most analysts predicted. This gave the opposition an opening to question the election results despite the fact that the international community, with the single exception of the United States, recognized the results as legitimate almost immediately.

Maduro's first year in office was marked by ups and downs. High inflation and shortages of key consumer goods such as toilet paper, along with opposition mobilization against him, led to doubts about whether he could hold things together. Following the failure of its efforts to overturn the April 2013 election, the opposition set its sights on the December 2013 municipal elections, which were viewed as a referendum on Maduro. Going into the election the opposition was confident that it would build on the gains made in April, with a negative result for Maduro being seen as the first step toward a recall campaign against him several years later.

The December 2013 municipal elections were, however, seen as a strong (if not overwhelming) victory for Maduro and a sign of the PSUV's continued political strength. The PSUV won 49.24 percent of the national vote compared with the opposition's 42.72 percent. This margin of victory—6.5 percent—was considerably wider than Maduro's margin in April. Of the 337 mayors elected the PSUV and its allies won 76 percent (256), the opposition won 22.5 percent (76), and independent forces won 1.5 percent (5). The PSUV won 14 of the country's 24 regional capitals, with the opposition taking the other 10. The turnout—58.92 percent—in this purely local election was larger than the turnout for the 2000 presidential election in Venezuela (see Table 2). It is also greater than the turnout in every U.S. *presidential* election since 1968.[4] Alongside the fact that Venezuela scored highest in Latin America in the 2013 Latinobarómetro survey for "interest in politics" (49 percent) and "support for democracy" (87 percent), this provides evidence that suggests Chavismo remained hegemonic through the end of 2013.

The following year brought escalating challenges and marked the beginning of the steady erosion of Chavista hegemony through the present. The year started well, with Maduro engaging in seemingly fruitful dialogue with the opposition about finding a peaceful way to move forward and even moving to tackle the issue of Venezuela's ridiculously low gasoline prices, which deprive the state of much-needed revenue and provide an opening for illegal contraband across the Colombian border. These discussions were cut short by the emergence of violent opposition protests and heavy-handed state repression between February and April 2014, with more than 40 killed, approximately half being opposition activists and half being government supporters and security forces.

Maduro managed to survive this crisis, which revealed a major split within the opposition. From mid-2014 on, however, he was confronted with an escalating economic crisis fueled by a 50 percent drop in the price of oil between June and December 2014 (Smilde, 2015: 49). During 2014 and 2015 Venezuela confronted runaway inflation, which topped 60 percent in 2014, scarcities of basic goods, and a steep drop in the value of its currency. The latter problem

was particularly acute, with the value of the Venezuelan bolivar plunging against the dollar, leading to a hundredfold difference in the official exchange rate for dollars and the black market rate: in August 2015 the official rate was 6.35 to 1 while the unofficial rate was over 600 to 1. Economists of all stripes argue that Venezuela must devalue its currency to bring the official and black market exchange rates back in line. Maduro, however, has refused to do this, and Smilde (2015: 50) has suggested that this may be because of the political fallout he suffered in early 2013 when, as acting president, he enacted a 46.5 percent currency devaluation and saw his popularity plummet. Another critical issue is massive corruption. According to Roland Denis (2015), a revolutionary activist, corruption permeates the state apparatus and has led to misdirection of US$300 billion in state resources. In the face of continuing low oil prices, this has generated increasing discontent. By late 2014 Maduro's approval was below 25 percent and the PSUV's was just 16 percent, with 85 percent of Venezuelans expressing the opinion that the country was headed in the wrong direction (Smilde, 2015: 49).

Maduro's and the PSUV's problems continued throughout 2015, as the price of oil fell further and further. In December 2015 voters punished the PSUV for the endless lines found throughout the country, rising inflation topping 100 percent, and growing poverty by giving the opposition a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly. This election marked a a significant electoral improvement for the opposition. The opposition fared poorly in the final two elections prior to Chávez's death: Henrique Capriles lost the October 2012 election by 11 percent, and in the December 2012 gubernatorial election the PSUV won 20 of 23 contests, many by quite large margins. Capriles's strong showing in the April 2013 presidential election gave the opposition renewed hope and seemed to ensure his place as the opposition's standard-bearer for the foreseeable future. His repeated promises (through the 2013 presidential election) to continue with popular programs initiated by Chávez such as the missions is consistent with the comparatively moderate profile that he and his party have within the opposition.

In the wake of the April 2013 election, however, Capriles embraced intransigence toward the government by refusing to recognize Maduro's victory and encouraging street protests that resulted in violence and damage to state property. While the United States supported this stance (showing the Obama administration's continuance of the Bush administration's bellicosity toward Venezuela), the Organization of American States and every government in Latin America, including the conservative governments of Mexico, Colombia, and Chile, recognized the election. The opposition's claims of fraud did not produce credible evidence. The opposition asked for and the government eventually agreed to a full audit (beyond the 53 percent of ballot boxes audited on election day). According to a statistical analysis by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, "the odds of getting the April 14 audit result if in fact the unaudited machines contained enough errors to reverse the election outcome are far less than one in 25 thousand trillion" (Rosnick and Weisbrot, 2013). The opposition wavered about accepting the audit results. The government was drawn into the conflict when a brawl broke out between PSUV and opposition legislators following the election. This was connected to Diosdado Cabello's refusal to allow opposition legislators to speak unless they recognized Maduro as

Venezuela's legitimate president. Cabello changed his position, and in late May the opposition legislators were again speaking.

The February–April 2014 protests led to a new split in the opposition. The protests were fanned by intransigent opposition leaders, in particular María Corina Machado and Leopoldo López. López is in prison on charges of fomenting a coup against the government. This has sparked an international outcry and condemnations from organizations accusing Maduro of political repression. Others, however, have pointed to López's history of antidemocratic behavior, going back to his close involvement with the 2002 coup (Lovato, 2015). López's incarceration is significant because of the split it revealed and exacerbated within the opposition. His hard-line stance toward the government contrasts with the electoral approach favored by Capriles. His popularity soared in the wake of his arrest, which occurred in the midst of the 2014 protests. Capriles distanced himself from the protests and López's intransigent opposition, saying, "We have to find a real solution to people's problems and avoid . . . failed past agendas" (Cawthorne and Ore, 2014).

In the wake of the December 2015 election the opposition is more empowered and, for the time being, united than it has been in years. The opposition's main goal is to remove Maduro from office. At the time of writing (May 2016), the opposition was pursuing multiple methods of doing this, most prominently a recall referendum, which they hope to force the government to hold by the end of 2016. To do this, the opposition must secure 20 percent of the electorate's signatures. To defeat Maduro more voters must vote against him than supported him in the 2013 election.

If the government is to have any hope of staying in office it must address three critical weaknesses. First, the currency issue, which is now glaring (the gap between the official and parallel currency is 100 times), must be addressed, with economists sympathetic to the government, such as Mark Weisbrot, advocating a "free float" that would bring the official and parallel rates in line. Second the government needs to confront the growing gap between the party and state leadership and the base by opening up more spaces for participation and popular control. If this is done in a vigorous manner it could make a dent in the corruption and inefficiency plaguing the state. Finally, the government needs to work on overcoming the contradictions generated by a highly uneven "transition to socialism" that has resulted in some social control of the state and the economy (socialism of the twenty-first-century) but has failed to overcome capitalism and statism. An additional, long-term challenge is overcoming the country's extreme dependency on oil. Unfortunately the Maduro administration has shown little willingness or ability to engage in any of these steps. Thus it seems that the PSUV's days in office may be numbered.

NOTES

1. A(n almost) month-by-month graphic of Chávez's Datanalisis approval rating can be found at http://www.bloggingsbyboz.com/2012/03/poll-numbers-chavez-approval-improves.html.

2. In contrast to other analyses, Lupu's does not show disproportionate electoral support for Chávez among the poor, but it does show that elites overwhelming rejected Chávez.

3. Terms such as "right" and "left" can only be understood within a particular context. In ways already discussed, the "right" of the PSUV is still quite "left."

4. http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/12statab/election.pdf.

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