

# Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era

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(Part of the online material to support the book *Non-democratic Politics: Authoritarianism, Dictatorship, and Democratization*)

## **The Roots of the Chávez Era**

Venezuelan politics over the last 25 years have been dominated by the controversial figure of the late Hugo Chávez, who first emerged into the public arena as one of the leaders of a failed military coup on 4 February 1992. The distant roots of that coup lay in nearly twenty years of continuous economic decline since the mid-seventies (see Figure 1) and on the inability of the existing political parties to do much about it, given Venezuela's dependence on oil revenues (Figure 2). But its more proximal trigger were the riots and repression that followed the announcement of an economic reform package in 1992 (an event known as the 'Caracazo'). The hardships imposed by these reforms, meant to address the government's insolvency, on the poorest Venezuelans, as well as the government's indiscriminate use of violence to put down the protests and looting that followed the announcement, radicalized a group of left-leaning mid-ranking officers within the armed forces, including Chávez.

Though their coup was foiled, Chávez was catapulted to fame when he addressed his co-conspirators on national TV to tell them that the coup had failed to achieve its objectives only 'por ahora' ('at this time') and that they should stop fighting and avoid further bloodshed. At that moment, the young, charismatic Chávez (the adjective "charismatic" would appear again and again whenever people described him – Merolla and Zechmeister 2011) appeared to give voice to the frustrations of a majority of Venezuelans who felt that the political system was no longer responsive to them. His intervention thus accelerated the decomposition of the Venezuelan party system, which had provided two main parties the opportunity to contest for power since the overthrow of military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958, and led to new openings for other groups to gain power.

Chávez was put in jail for his participation in the coup, but (along with the rest of the coup participants) was pardoned in 1994 by president Rafael Caldera (who had himself been a beneficiary of the political turmoil, having been elected after president Carlos Andrés Pérez was impeached on corruption charges in 1993). He soon organized a political party and began to campaign with many of his former comrades to completely change the system, though this time by electoral means. He was also immediately a polarizing figure, railing against the privileges of the 'oligarchy' and using deliberately provocative rhetoric, but was not yet committed to the 'Bolivarian socialism' for which he would later become well-known. Capitalizing on the widespread sense that the main traditional parties were corrupt and unable to represent the population (Mainwaring 2012), he was elected in 1998 to the Presidency with 56 per cent of the vote, with disproportionate support coming from the poorest sectors of the population (Lupu 2010). He soon called for a referendum to convene a constitutional assembly, which was resoundingly approved with 86 per cent of the vote, and then called for another election to staff the constituent assembly, whose results again favored him strongly. Though Chávez-allied candidates garnered only about 53 per cent of the vote, due to clever nomination strategies and strictly enforced unity they took 93 per cent of the seats in the assembly, while opposition supporters wasted their votes among too many independent candidates (Corrales and Penfold 2010, 18–19).

The Chávez-dominated constitutional assembly then suspended the Congress (the

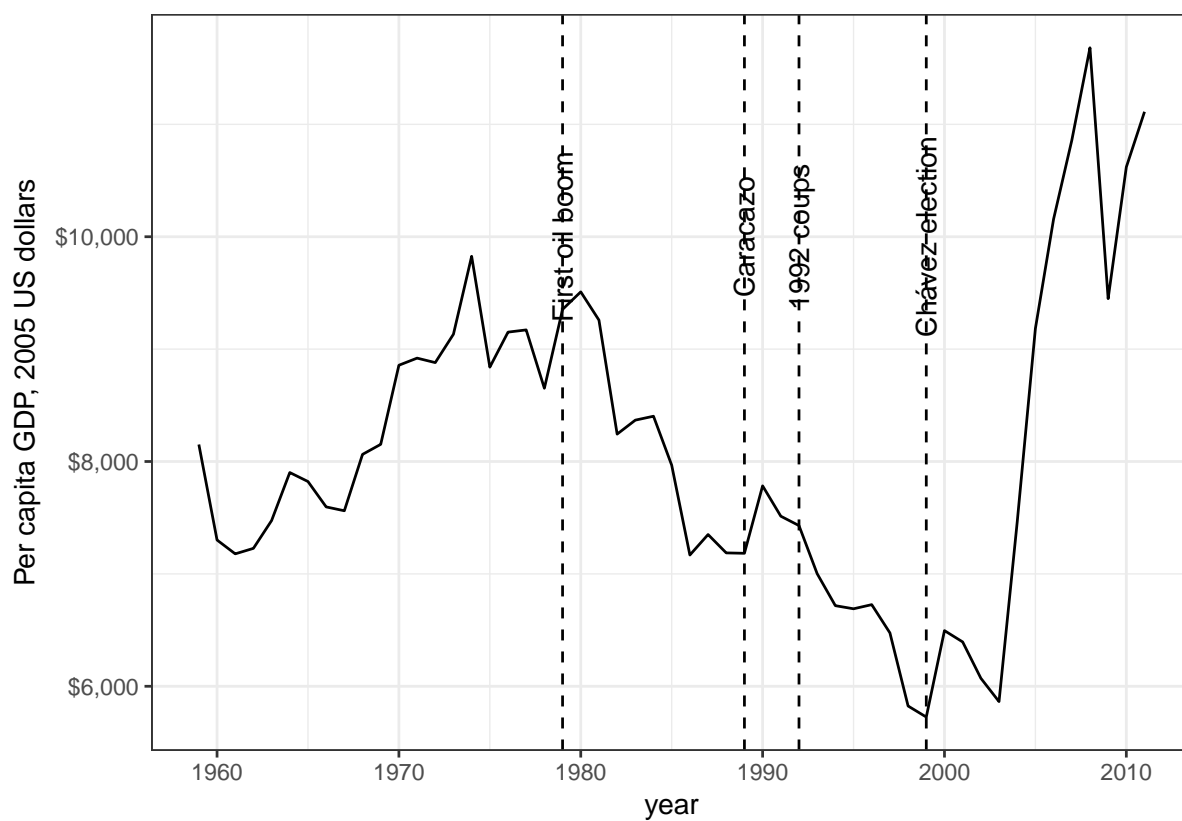


Figure 1: Economic performance of the Venezuelan economy, 1958-2013. Economic data from the Penn World Table v. 8.1 (Feenstra and Timmer 2013). The measure used is GDP per capita, expenditure side (chained PPPs), in 2005 US dollars.

Venezuelan parliament) and produced a new constitution which, among other things, extended the presidential term from five to six years, made immediate presidential re-election possible, eliminated the upper house of the Congress, gave the president the power to call referenda at will, and banned public financing of political parties. The constitution also introduced a number of ‘direct democratic’ features, like recall referenda for all public offices, contingent on gathering sufficient signatures (Corrales and Penfold 2010, 18–19), and promised to guarantee a large number of social rights. The constitutional assembly then declared that the new constitution required a new election to ‘relegitimize’ all the offices of the state, including the president’s. So again a presidential election was held, in which Chávez was re-elected, this time with 60 per cent of the vote, to a new six-year term, this time with the possibility of immediate re-election.

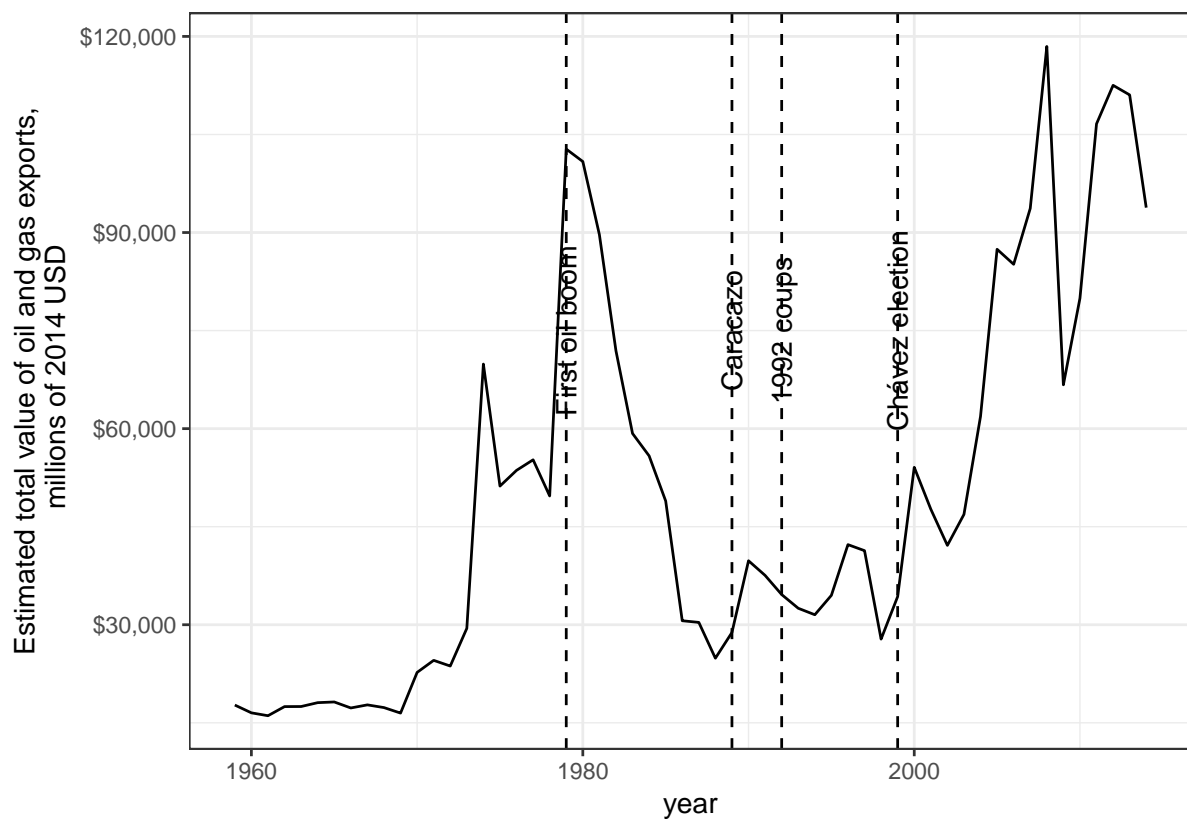


Figure 2: Oil and gas revenues in Venezuela, 1959-2014. Oil and gas data from Ross and Mahdavi (2015).

## A Polarized Country

This exhausting series of elections – four major elections in less than two years – led to increased social polarization with their aggressive rhetoric and constant emotional mobilization. The more Chávez won elections, and the more power he seemed to accumulate, the more traditional parties and the upper and middle classes feared him. Though the integrity of the elections was largely unquestioned at this time, opposition parties also began arguing that the playing field was being slowly but surely turned against them,

and that Venezuela's democracy was being eroded. In particular, the government stacked the National Electoral Council with its supporters, received from the assembly the power to legislate by decree for a limited period, constantly used its legal powers to compel private radio and TV stations to transmit the president's messages (so-called 'cadenas' or 'chains'), and occasionally threatened to expropriate property. Chávez thus soon faced a hostile private media, the dislike of the Bush administration in the United States, and frequent protest events organized by the opposition (events which included in some cases the participation of active-duty military officers).

At the same time, Chávez developed a devoted following among groups that had felt excluded by the traditional political parties. His style – which included frequent TV appearances where he mesmerized his audience by singing or reciting poetry, making policy on the fly, firing and hiring ministers, giving history lessons, and creatively insulting his opponents – resonated among Venezuelan popular masses, and his government soon began to invest the proceeds of increasing oil revenues into social programs that reduced poverty and inequality, which in turn cemented their loyalty (though most of the important "Misiones," as these programs are called, began only in 2003 – Corrales and Penfold 2010, 26; Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson 2011). Most importantly, the government made the poor feel both materially and symbolically included to a much greater degree than ever before in Venezuelan history, even if particular social programs did not always have the advertised results, and constant electoral mobilization helped to produce a core of extremely loyal and well-organized supporters (López Maya and Lander 2011).

Hostility between rising 'Chavistas' and declining but still powerful opposition groups came to a head in 2002. The latter, which had felt especially threatened by some of the laws decreed by Chávez without consultation, felt that they could force him to resign through popular mobilization. A huge march on 11 April 2002 – perhaps more than a million people were on the streets – ended in a violent confrontation between Chavistas and anti-Chavistas near the presidential palace; and though it is not entirely clear who was responsible for the violence, or exactly what happened next (the best account is still that of Nelson 2009), it is nevertheless reasonably well established that a faction of the military, in conjunction with conservative elements of the Venezuelan elite, took advantage of the confusion to stage a coup that briefly removed Chávez from power and installed the president of the chamber of commerce, Pedro Carmona, as president (with the connivance, but not direct support, of the US government).

As the nature of this new regime became clear, both moderate opponents of Chávez and Chavistas mobilized street protests against the coup. As in other coups around the world, however, the key players were to be found within the military itself (Singh 2014). General Lucas Rincón had announced in the early hours of 12 April that Chávez had resigned. As long as other military officers believed this announcement, they went along with the coup, regardless of their private sympathies, believing that they had little chance of reversing the outcome. But soon enough this announcement was contradicted by credible news that Chávez had not in fact resigned. This provided an opening for his supporters within the military, particularly General Raúl Baduel, who commanded Chávez's old paratrooper division. Mobilizing his forces, Baduel recaptured the presidential palace and with the support of other military leaders restored Chávez to power on 14 April.

The whole episode terminally discredited much of the opposition and the private media in the eyes of Chavistas, and provided justification for the regime to consistently dismiss

them as ‘golpistas’ (coup mongers), a habit that continues to this day. Moreover, it motivated the government to attempt to exert greater control over the private media, which had mostly supported the coup, and to create its own supportive media apparatus, though these efforts would not bear fruit until a few years later (MacRory 2013; Bennett and Naim 2015; Corrales 2015). And though in the immediate aftermath of the coup both Chávez and the opposition appeared chastened, and half-hearted negotiations between the government and the opposition were conducted under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS), polarization did not decrease; if anything, it soon increased.

In December 2002, the opposition called for a general strike, led by the state oil company. For three months, Venezuelan oil production collapsed, yet Chávez did not bend. Instead, he fired nearly 60 per cent of the company’s personnel and asserted far more direct control over its revenues than ever before. The opposition then called for a recall referendum (at the time, Chávez’ popularity was hovering around 40 per cent), which the Chávez government sought to discourage in a variety of ways through its control of the signature-gathering process via the Electoral Council. The referendum eventually took place in 2004, but by this point oil prices had picked up, and the government channeled large resources into social spending that boosted its popularity (Corrales and Penfold 2010, 26–28). While the efficacy of these programs is disputed (for good critiques, see Rodríguez 2008; Ortega and Rodríguez 2008; Grier and Maynard 2015), there is no question that Chávez, aided by rising oil prices, did preside over a genuine reduction in poverty and inequality (see Figure 3), and that this helped it win the recall referendum with 59 per cent of the vote, even as the opposition claimed fraud (an accusation that was never properly substantiated).

Municipal and state elections followed, where the demoralized opposition again lost much ground. By 2005, opposition parties, lacking trust in the electoral system, decided to boycott the assembly elections, a mistake which led to the government to gain total control over the assembly. And with each new win by Chávez and his supporters the opposition became ever more divided.

The Chávez government, by contrast, came out of this conflict greatly strengthened. It had not only won every electoral contest so far, but had managed to purge the oil company and the military of opposition supporters and strengthened its control over both institutions, and now had information on opposition voters who had signed the recall referendum petition (the so-called ‘Lista Tascón,’ which turned into the ‘Maisanta’ database), which it could use to pressure them by threatening to deny them access to public benefits or public jobs unless they supported the government (Hsieh et al. 2011).

The distribution of social benefits also became more politicized as state resources increased (Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson 2011; Hawkins and Hansen 2006), and the government embarked on a program to establish ‘media hegemony’ – creating new radio and TV stations allied to the government, threatening private stations that were too stridently anti-government (a threat eventually made good in 2007, when the opposition-leaning RCTV was denied a license renewal on the grounds of having supported the 2002 coup), and making liberal use of its powers to compel private media to spread its messages. Oil prices were increasing, Chavistas controlled all branches of the government, and Chávez was personally popular. Unsurprisingly, the 2006 presidential elections were a rout for the opposition, as Chávez won 63 per cent of the vote, despite the fact that the opposition managed to agree on a unity candidate, Manuel Rosales.

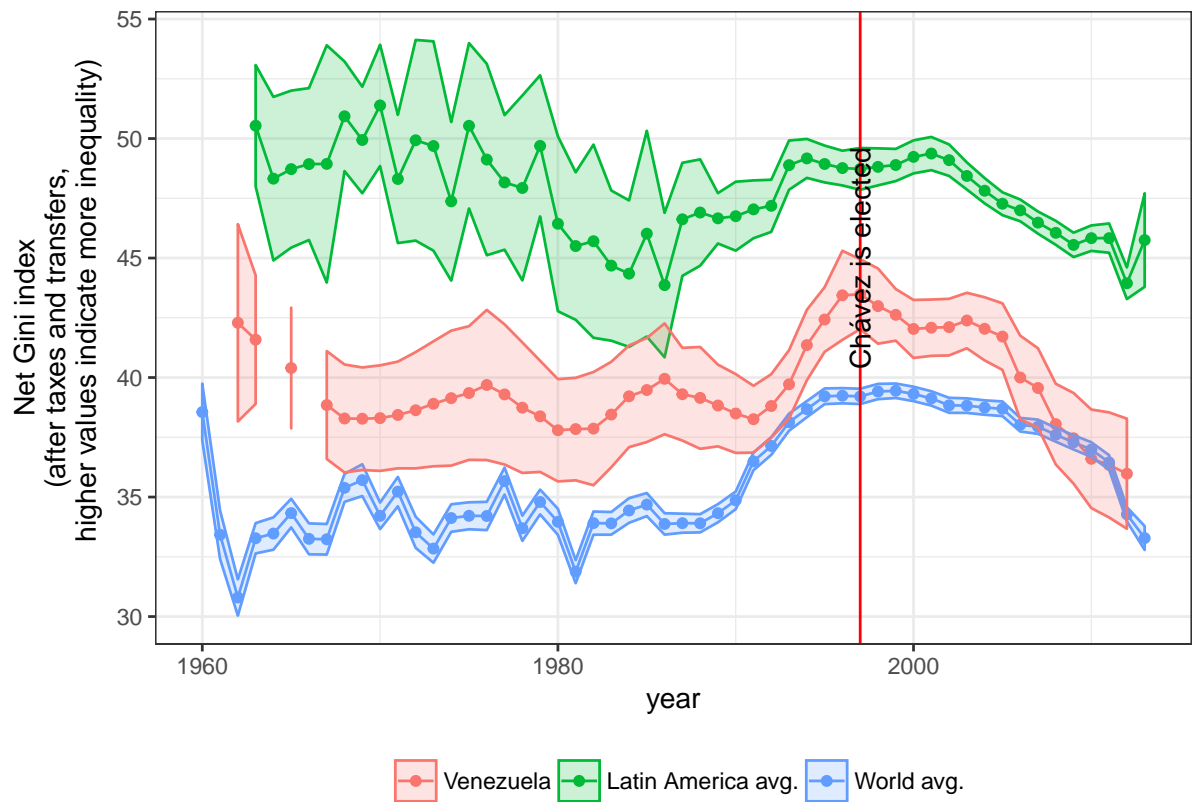


Figure 3: Inequality in Venezuela, 1962-2012. Data from the Standardized Worldwide Income Inequality Database (Solt 2016; Solt 2009). Shaded areas represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Chávez was further emboldened by these results to move ‘the revolution’ forward. A new constitutional reform project was introduced, eliminating all restrictions on re-election (previously the constitution had a two term limit on immediate re-election, which meant that Chávez would not have been able to run for president again in 2012) and tightening the conditions on recall referenda. Other reforms were also proposed, including the introduction of ‘communal councils’ which were supposed to strengthen opportunities for popular participation. A referendum was scheduled for 2007.

Yet this time Chávez appeared to miscalculate, as neither Chavistas nor the military were fully on board with these reforms, and in particular they objected to the removal of term limits for the president. Despite his undoubted personal popularity, Chávez lost the referendum and accepted the loss, though with bad grace; to this day, official results have not been published, and there is speculation that only military pressure led Chávez to agree to respect the outcome. Whatever the case, a purge of military officers followed, including General Raúl Baduel, who had been instrumental in rescuing Chávez during the 2002 coup but was convicted of corruption in 2009 after a trial that most observers believe had something to do with his very public opposition to Chávez’ constitutional reform and the lifting of presidential term limits in particular (Corrales and Penfold 2010, 36).

Despite this loss, in any case soon to be remedied (most of the government’s reform proposals were eventually passed by means that did not require approval by the voters), the regime continued to consolidate its power. In the 2008 municipal and state elections, about 270 candidates were banned from competing on vague accusations of corruption, 200 of them from the opposition. And in 2009 several opposition mayors and governors were publicly accused of corruption. One of them (former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales) fled to Peru rather than face what he believed would be a biased justice system (vividly exemplified by the jailing of judge María Lourdes Afiuni in December 2009 after she ordered the conditional release of a businessman on trial for corruption); another (Antonio Ledezma, opposition mayor of Greater Caracas) was stripped of all his powers by the assembly, and left in office with little to do. Such selective prosecution (Chavistas were rarely targeted by corruption investigations, unless they had been especially vocal in their criticisms of the revolution) demoralized and divided the opposition.

Meanwhile the government eventually succeeded in lifting presidential term limits using another referendum (approved with indifferent turnout by 55 per cent of the voters), which also allowed for the re-election of governors. The question of succession was thus taken out of the agenda; Chávez would run again for president (and win) in 2012, which increased the incentives of Chavista leaders to stick with the president. Electoral rules were also rewritten unilaterally to the benefit of the government, with the result that in the 2010 assembly elections the opposition won slightly over 50 per cent of the votes but took only 40 per cent of the seats.

At the same time, the new communal councils and community media, though dependent on the central government for their funding, did provide new opportunities for popular engagement (Ellner 2010; López Maya and Lander 2011; Fernandes 2011; Hawkins 2016), and social programs were expanded further. The government saw itself as engaged in class warfare, which justified its actions; it did not accept the legitimacy of the opposition, which it considered anti-democratic. For its part, the opposition returned the favor, refusing to accept the legitimacy of the government. But winning so many elections gave the government the upper hand, holding international criticism at bay and tending



to produce fissures within the opposition between those who thought the best way of confronting the regime was through electoral means, and those who thought the ‘way out’ was through street protest.

## **Chavismo after Chávez**

In June 2011 Chávez announced that he was ill with cancer. Though clearly weakened and dying, and often absent in Cuba for treatment, he competed in the last presidential election of his life in October 2012. The opposition unified behind Henrique Capriles Randonsky, who proved a tenacious campaigner, but Chávez was nevertheless won by about 11 percentage points (55 per cent to 44 per cent). The opposition took solace in the fact that this was the smallest margin of victory Chávez had ever achieved, despite deploying massive state resources and reducing genuine opposition media to insignificance (Kornblith 2013).

Chávez died shortly thereafter, however, leaving behind a polarized country and a much less charismatic successor, Nicolás Maduro, who went on to win the April 2013 special election by slightly more than 1 percentage point (50.61 per cent to 49.12 per cent). The opposition never accepted these results, claiming fraud. Though such complaints have not been proven, it is clear that numerous irregularities occurred before the vote; among other things, government workers identified as opposition supporters were punished and sometimes lost their jobs (Kornblith 2013, 53).

The Maduro government has been less well loved than the Chávez government, and not just because Maduro does not have Chávez’s political skills. Low prices for oil and disastrous economic policy have combined to produce widespread scarcity, extremely high inflation, and even hunger in parts of the country, making the government highly unpopular. (The government’s efforts to argue that the country is the victim of an ‘economic war’ directed by elites and the United States have become less and less persuasive to the majority of the population as the crisis continues, despite the much larger degree of control over the airwaves that the government holds today – a classic case of the diminishing effectiveness of propaganda that is in conflict with everyday experience, discussed in chapter 8).

But Chavistas still control all the major levers of power, and though scattered popular protests are common (sometimes even very large protests), the government shows no signs of slackening its hold on power, though it has become more repressive as it has lost popular support (Corrales 2015). For example, in 2014 it arrested a popular opposition leader, Leopoldo López, who had called for street protests against the government. It eventually found him guilty of ‘inciting violence’ through ‘subliminal messages’ and other charges, and sentenced him to 13 years in prison. These charges are all widely thought to be fabricated by opposition groups and international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch (Vivanco 2015). Less high-profile opposition leaders have also been jailed on flimsy pretexts – far more than during Chávez’s tenure in power.

The government has also shown itself less willing to accept the results of electoral competition now that it is unpopular. For example, after the surprising victory of the united opposition in legislative elections in 2015 (where the parties of the opposition coalition won a supermajority in the assembly), the government proceeded to systematically dis-

mantle the assembly's powers, using its control over the Supreme Court to annul any laws that it did not like and preventing it from seating two deputies needed for a 3/5ths supermajority (which would have allowed the assembly to change the composition of the Supreme Court and the Electoral Council). And when the opposition called for a recall referendum on Maduro's unpopular presidency, the government used its control over the major institutions of the state to first delay, and eventually cancel, the referendum on spurious grounds. As of early 2017, despite some efforts to negotiate a political solution to the crisis sponsored by the Vatican and the OAS, the government remains firmly in control despite widespread dissatisfaction, and apparently moving in a more clearly authoritarian direction.

## Was Bolivarian Venezuela Democratic?

The combination of extensive electoral activity, grassroots participation and popular support, an opposition that has not always been respectful of democratic norms, and concentration of power in the executive branch has made Venezuela during the Chávez era difficult to straightforwardly classify as democratic or non-democratic. Opposition supporters point to the barriers to political competition they experience today (including government dominance over the airwaves, abuse of state resources for electoral purposes, and the lack of checks and balances) as evidence of the regime's non-democratic character, while government supporters point to many elections that have never been shown to be fraudulent, the social achievements of the regime, and its institutions of popular participation, as evidence of its democratic bona-fides.

Moreover, as the narrative above indicates, the political situation in Venezuela has changed significantly since 1999, so that it does not make sense to speak of a uniformly democratic or non-democratic regime throughout this period. Many political scientists think the regime was definitely democratic at the beginning of the Chávez era, when most of the media was allied with the opposition and the government did not have such extensive control over all branches of the state, but clearly non-democratic towards the end of his time in power.

Nevertheless, they disagree about when the transition happened and what kind of regime followed it: thus, for example, (Magaloni, Chu, and Min 2013) think the Chávez regime became non-democratic in 2002, classifying it as a multiparty autocracy, while (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014) classify the Venezuelan regime as a non-democratic personalist regime from 2006 onwards. Other political scientists prefer to classify Venezuela as a competitive authoritarian regime since at least 2006, when Chávez finally achieved full control over all branches of government and succeeded in disarming the private media (Kornblith 2013, Corrales (2011)).

More fine-grained assessments of the 'level' of democracy (rather than of the regime type) are a bit more helpful. The Unified Democracy Scores (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010), which aggregates information from multiple democracy indexes (including Freedom House, Polity IV, the Economist Democracy Index, and several other datasets), adjusting it for reliability, shows a gradual drop in the level of democracy in Venezuela since before the arrival of Chávez to power in 1999 (Figure 4), with a small drop-off around Chávez' election in 1999, a much bigger one again around 2006, when the country's score goes

below the conventional cut-off (0.5) for democracy, and reaching its lowest point around 2009, with the lifting of term limits.

The consensus view among political scientists thus seems to be that the level of democracy was trending downwards in Venezuela even before the arrival of Chávez, that the regime slowly became less democratic after Chávez' election, but that it is only after the lifting of term limits in 2009 that we can confidently call the Venezuelan regime non-democratic.

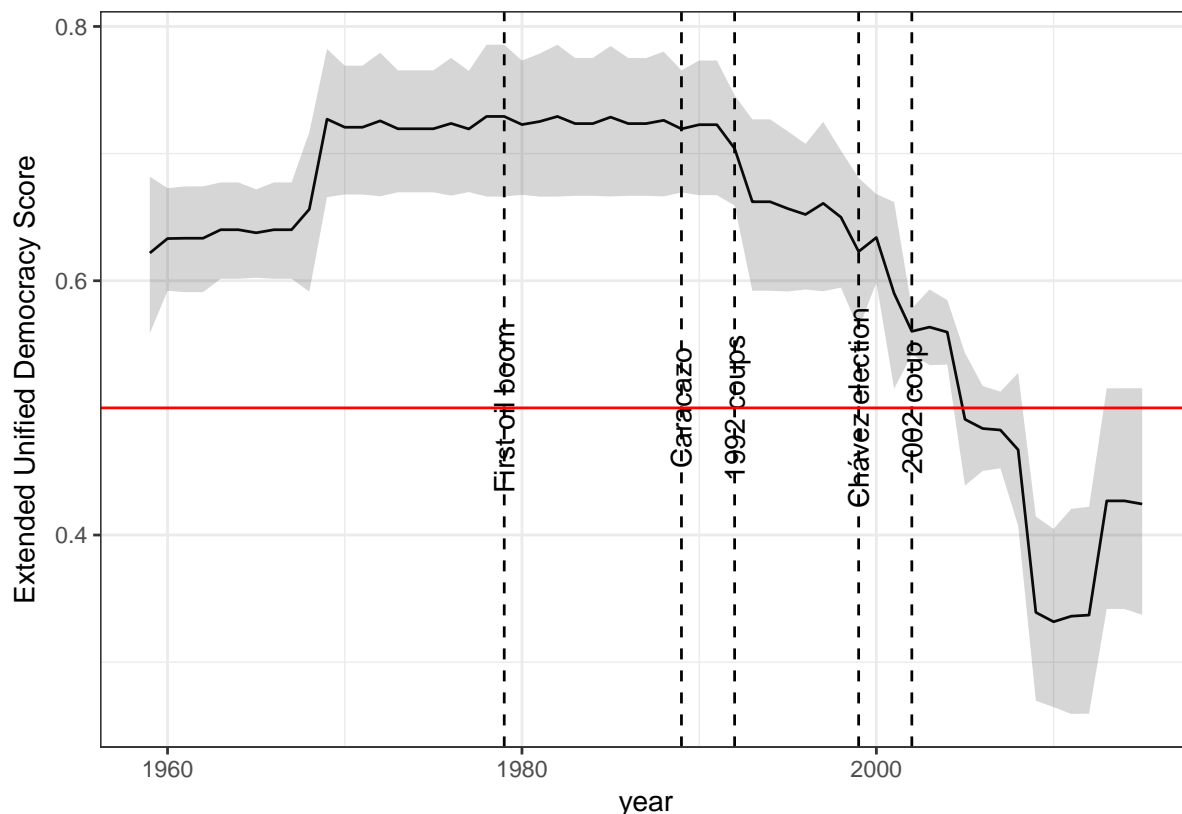


Figure 4: Level of democracy in Venezuela, 1959-2015. Democracy data from Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton (2010), extended to 2015 by the author (Márquez 2016).

These numbers mask sometimes fierce disagreement, however (Hawkins 2016); some scholars insist that there is very little that is undemocratic about the Chávez regime, and that in fact by the standards of ‘participative’ democracy, the Chávez regime should score far higher than many other supposed democracies, given its inclusive social programs and opportunities for popular participation (Ellner 2010; Ciccariello-Maher 2016). It is nevertheless worth noting that quantitative measures of participatory and egalitarian democracy gathered by the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, et al. 2016b; Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, et al. 2016a) also show declines during the Chávez era, though these are less sharp than the decline in the V-Dem measure of liberal democracy (Figure 5).

These disagreements about the nature of Venezuela’s democracy and its quality are also found among ordinary Venezuelan citizens. Though survey answers are often difficult to interpret, the majority of Venezuelans seem to express high levels of agreement with the idea that democracy is the best form of government (Figure 6) and conceptualize

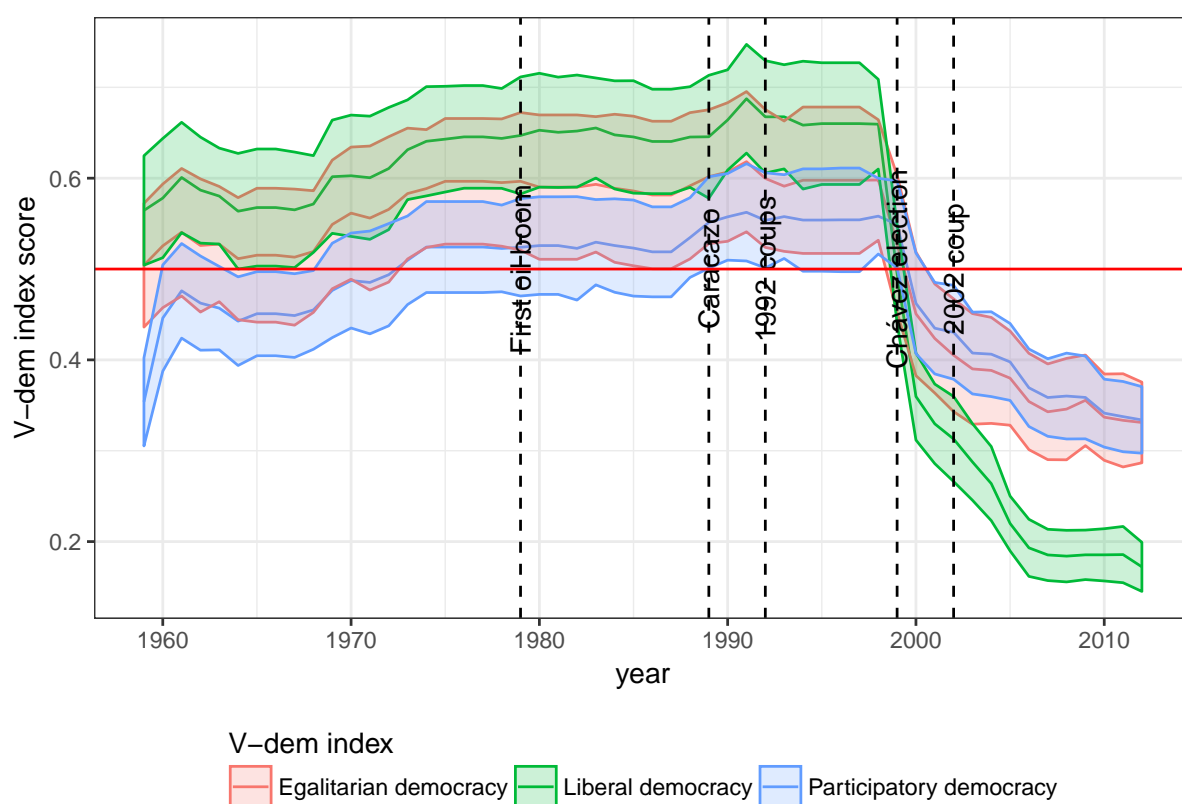


Figure 5: Level of democracy in Venezuela, 1959-2015, according to V-Dem. Democracy data from the Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, et al. 2016b; Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, et al. 2016a).

it in primarily liberal terms (Canache 2012), but believe the level of democracy in the country has declined in recent years - particularly after the death of Chávez in early 2013 (Figure 7). Nevertheless, Chavistas seem to conceptualize democracy in more 'participatory' terms and appear to be more satisfied with its quality than opposition supporters (Lupien 2015).

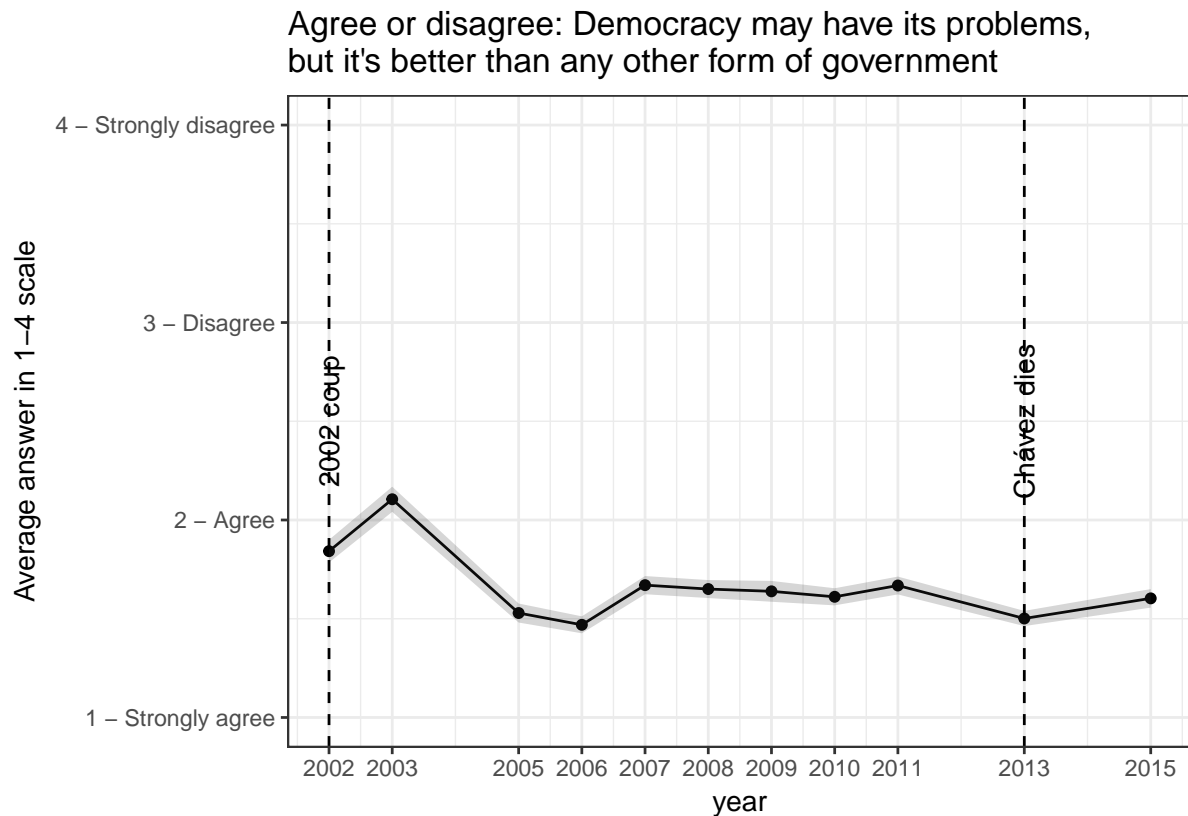


Figure 6: Support for democracy in Venezuela, 2002-2015. The figure reports the mean level of agreement with the statement, 'Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government,' on a 1-4 scale, with 1 meaning 'strongly agree' and 4 meaning 'strongly disagree.' Data from the Latinobarometro opinion polls (Corporación Latinobarómetro and ASEP/JDS 1995–2015).

Despite these uncertainties and disagreements, it is at least possible to argue that the type of political competition for state power possible in Venezuela has changed substantially, with the opposition becoming progressively disadvantaged since the early 2000s (partly through its own actions), and the government becoming more and more able to manipulate the rules of political competition to suit its needs. And whatever one may think of the regime's socialist ends, elections have played an essential role in this process, allowing the government to mobilize core supporters domestically, hold international critics at bay, effectively paint the opposition as sore losers and undemocratic plotters, and muster majorities in key assemblies to accumulate and consolidate power.

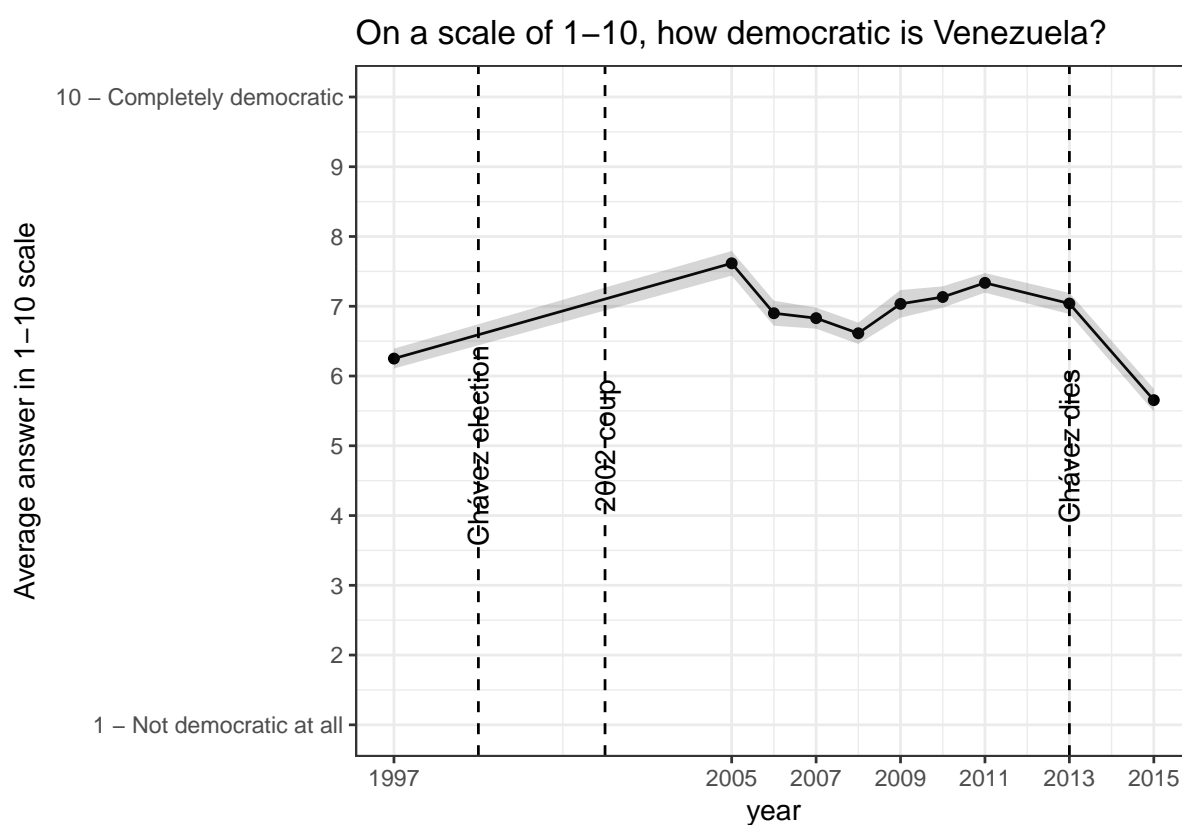


Figure 7: Perceptions of the level of democracy in Venezuela. The figure reports the mean answer to the question, ‘On a 1-10 scale, where 1 = ‘totally undemocratic’ and ‘10 = totally democratic’, how democratic do you think Venezuela is?’. Data from the Latinobarometro opinion polls (Corporación Latinobarómetro and ASEP/JDS 1995–2015).

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