Title: Co-optation or Empowerment, Chavez’s Impact on Venezuelan Civil Society
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Date: December 17, 2012
Institution name/journal where submitted: McGill University

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Venezuela’s liberal democracy tradition, stemming from the historical Punto Fijo pact, came to an end when Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998. He claimed to reform a Venezuela that was plagued by a stagnant, corrupt political system, which had led to growing political apathy. Chavez intended to create a participatory democracy that would usher in his ‘21st century socialism’. In order to do so, Chavez not only implemented constitutional and institutional reforms, but also revolutionized civil society participation through social spending. This paper will analyze Venezuela’s polarized civil society and assess whether it serves as an agent representing the will of the people. In a broader perspective, it will also try to tie in currents of Latin American politics, while focusing on institutional reforms and political conflict. Venezuela, somewhat like Chile, used to be a role model of liberal democracy in Latin America developed world technocrats would point to, but soon it became a role model for many that wanted to step away from a growingly exclusive liberal democracy that did not implement necessary social spending to help the poor masses since it was stagnated by elite control. ‘What was once Latin America’s paradigmatic example of ‘party fortitude’ had become by the mid-1990s an egregious case of party deficit’\(^1\). The massive poverty and inequality, and the frustration in an electoral system that did not bring the change expected are reminiscent for democracies in several Latin American countries where civil society cannot serve as an agent for reform, but is rather forced to hope that elections will bring change in a corrupt party system. This, along with a further polarization between the classes, paved the way for the populist Hugo Chavez to introduce his new model of participatory democracy. The essential question scholars on Venezuela deal with is whether Chavez’s policies actually produced an inclusive democracy that values civil society as an insulated agent or if his path to participatory democracy was only

taken to coopt a polarized population through populist rhetoric in order to create an autocratic, unfair system in which his incumbent government has an unfair advantage.

**Literary Review of the Bolivarian Circles:**

The case of the Bolivarian Circles is reminiscent of many of Chavez’s participatory projects and will serve as an example of the nature of Venezuelan civil society as a whole. Also, to truly understand Chavez’s impact on democracy one must look at his impact on the Venezuelan opposition and its institutional framework.

In 2000, President Hugo Chavez initiated an immense social project called the ‘Bolivarian Circles to abide by his 1999 constitutional changes and start what he calls the ‘democratic revolution’ of Venezuela. The name Bolivarian Circles takes its origins from Chavez’s self-created political theory, the Bolivarian revolution. This Bolivarian revolution is characterized mainly by a different approach to foreign policy that urges Latin American nations to strengthen trade with each other to have a more favorable position in the world economy and also focuses on better civic-military relations and increased participation of all people to become agents of such change. The Bolivarian Circles consisted of 11 members that were required to pledge allegiance to Venezuela’s new constitution and each of whose tasks was to individually serve the interests of their communities. While the Venezuelan opposition often depicts this group as a ‘circle of terror’, or a wild ‘horde’, Chavez, and many supporters of the emerging

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3 Hawkins, Hansen, Dependent Civil Society: The Circulos Bolivarianos in Venezuela, Latin American research review, 2006, pg. 103

4 Hérnandez, Against the comedy of civil society, Journal of Latin American Studies, 2010, pg. 137
New Left in Venezuela praise this development since it not only gives voice to the disadvantaged urban poor but also, sets a precedent in Venezuelan history in giving citizens the direct opportunity to make direct policy recommendations for their communities.

These radically opposed assessments are an embodiment of Venezuela’s polarization and studies have shown that neither the opposition nor the government are correct in their simplistic view of a very complex participatory system that resulted in ambivalent effects to Venezuelan democracy.

Before their decline in 2004, the circles engaged over 2.2 million members, which is quite substantial considering the population of Venezuela, which was 24.5 million at that time. Members of the Bolivarian Circles had to refer to a National Coordination office to present their project and demand more funds. This system bears advantages and disadvantages since on the one hand it simplified the funding process, making the government able to incentivize competition for funding amongst different Circles, but on the other hand it severely decreases the insulation of these Circles and makes it easy to start a pro-government mobilization.

The principal activities of these Circles were not usually or necessarily political but they certainly offered the Chavez administration an easily mobilized stronghold for political support in mass rallies especially around election time, or the referendum of 2004. The major activities of these Circles included literacy and premedical education, volunteer work in health clinics, and health campaigns. Unfortunately, there are no concrete statistics that depict the direct impact the Circles had on the life of the urban poor but this impact must have unquestionably been substantial, bringing health services and education to the ‘barrios’ which had been out the government’ reach for previous decades. At the height of the Circles’ activity the government
also launched the Health Committees (Comités de Salud) to administer health clinics. The number of committees can be drawn from the number of clinics, which is 6,500, but the ‘exact number of individuals participating is unknown’\textsuperscript{5}. While many of these activities increasing the welfare of society certainly were of no political nature, it is important to mention that while the Circles focused on health and education, ‘political activity in support of Chavez was a frequent and important part of their activities’\textsuperscript{6}. Members of the circles cannot be seen as part of Chavez’s MVR party, but they certainly played a key role in the mass protests on Caracas’ streets following a temporary coup on President Chavez in April 2002. Scholars of the Bolivarian Circles generally agree about the dependency of Bolivarian Circles but partially fail to acknowledge the complex tasks and importance of their communities.

After having read several papers that deal with Chavez’s impact on civil society and democracy as a whole it becomes evident that Venezuela’s civil society, the opposition and the incumbency are highly polarized. While some scholars decide to pick sides either praising Chavez’s accomplishments in lowering inequality and including the people in democracy that have had a voice previously, others criticize him of coopting a group of supporters for his disposal, and through his militia and the introduction of far reaching constitutional changes and pressures on the opposition undermining competition in democracy. That Hugo Chavez did undermine democracy in Venezuela and civil society is by no means totally insulated. However, the two-party system that resulted in the Punto Fijo Pact needed to be reformed and the massive poverty levels had to be addressed. Although the opposition holds a clear disadvantage, they

\textsuperscript{5} Hawkins, Who mobilizes? Participatory democracy in Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution, Latin American Politics and Society, 2010, pg. 5237

\textsuperscript{6} Hawkins, Hansen 108
have the opportunity to finally challenge Chavez’s government and the future of Venezuelan democracy which, while at risk, can be saved through compromise and the growth of the middle class.

**Empirical Analysis including a brief review of opposition and in institutional change in Venezuela:**

The ambivalence of the Circles is reflected in their role in civil society. To truly understand civil society, one must consider citizenship. Prior to Chavez’s rise to power, citizenship in Venezuela was determined by consumption, enabling the elites and some parts of the middle sector to purchase the services vital for advancement. Private clinics outperformed the few, overpopulated public clinics that existed, while students from wealthy families could afford private education, making them much more likely to attend university. This model was detrimental to Venezuelan society not only because it became increasingly polarized but also because it made social mobility essentially impossible. After Chavez mobilized the many disenfranchised and translated it into a surprising electoral success in 1998, it not only marked the end of the old established political parties, but it also altered the model of citizenship in Venezuela.

Venezuela’s civil society in the Chavez era can be described as the combination of two models; citizenship as cooptation and citizenship as agency. The Circles and other parts of Venezuelan civil society, along with a set of Chavez’s social policies and institutional reforms confirm that premise. If civil society is to work as an agent, it has to openly challenge the government with demands for improvements, transparency and accountability. The Circles
frequently showed such behavior, rejecting national subordination and preferring to be more insulated. This was exemplified by the ‘complaints we heard about the selection of candidates for local elections’\(^7\). The Circles, urging President Chavez to stand by his 1998 campaign slogan ‘Con Chavez manda el pueblo’\(^8\) (With Chavez the people rule), complained about the MVR’s local candidates, arguing that they infringed on their sovereignty and were not as suited as the Circles to assess the primary local needs. The complaints in some localities grew to so many that some Circles decided to run their own candidate against Chavez’s MVR in certain local elections. Circles’ members were largely firm believers in internal democracy and showed, despite prevailing affinity for Chavez’s charisma, a sophisticated level of institutionalization necessary for civil society movements to work as agents.

Internal democracy, as well as a certain level of institutionalization might make it easy to conclude that the Circles largely served as agents of society bargaining with the government. But the Circles fail to abide by other parameters that determine the insulation of a civil society group. In order to become an agent that accepts and encompasses all parts of society, a civil society initiative must accept and value a pluralistic democracy. In essence, this means that even if a civil society like the Circles demand reform and further social spending, they have to accept that other civil society groups can voice their demands as well. The earlier opposition remarks alluded to that depicted the Circles as ‘wild hordes’ find some substance here, as violence against opposition members stays prevalent. There is a controversy over whether these violent confrontations were initiated by Chavez, or if they were carried out by the Circles independently.

\(^7\) Hawkins, Hansen 112  
\(^8\) Cameron, Major, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez: Savior or Threat to Democracy, Latin American Research Review, 2001, pg 262
According to the CB survey\(^9\), members of Circles seem to be more radical than members of Chavez’s MVR movement, which is quite alarming. While most MVR members preferred gradual social change through reform, the Circles seemed to be divided between political moderates, and a significant proportion that demanded deep-reaching revolutionary change by any means\(^10\). The same groups are also divided in determining the true meaning of their Circles. While 41% argue that the sole purpose is to serve their respective communities, 42% see their primary task in enforcing and supporting Hugo Chavez\(^11\), a fact which makes it extremely difficult to label the Circles as either an agent or a coopted civilian group as a whole. The fear of growing clientelism due to Chavez’s participatory programs is surely not totally groundless; when visiting the casas Bolivarian ‘posters, poetry, and other messages dedicated to Chavez and the recall campaign’\(^12\) were to be found. While this is alarming, the high level of partisan alignment might point to the same cooptation that rested in many labor unions when Latin American politicians used Import Substitution Industrialization to provide domestic firms with subsidies in return for political support. Thought this might be part of the explanation, it does not entirely explain the pro-Chavez bias in the Circles and other participatory initiatives. The bias could be the ‘product of a subtle process of self-screening driven by Chavez’s populist discourse and leftist Bolivarian ideology’\(^13\). This is an application of the retrospective economic voting theory\(^14\), according to which voters respond to the benefits they receive by supporting the government providing them. Chavez’s support could be the result rather than the cause of participation in the Circles.

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9 Hawkins, Hansen
10 Hawkins, Hansen 119
11 Hawkins, Hansen 120
12 Hawkins, Hansen 120
13 Hawkins 5255
14 Lewis-Beck
Countries with vibrant civil societies, also allow for their citizens to be part in several organizations since passionate activists usually tend to bargain the government for a set of different reform changes. The conclusions that can be drawn from Circles again show contending results since many activists are engaged in several initiatives, ‘but largely only within the Chavista movement’¹⁵.

The specific study of the Bolivarian Circles makes it easier to understand some of Chavez’s later participatory initiatives. Chavez calls its participatory democratic ambition the ‘sixth branch of government’, creating Comités de Tierra Urbana (Urban Land Committees) and the Consejos Comunales (Community Councils) with 2 million and 8 million members respectively. The 3.5% of Venezuela’s GDP¹⁶ spent on these two social programs underlines how important they are to the Chavez administration. The Community councils largely replaced the Circles as means of community management, but the obstacles remain. In fact, while a substantial amount of funding of the Circles came from the activists themselves, the community councils created in 2005 are even more dependent on government funding and to some extent on the ‘charismatic authority’¹⁷ of Chavez remains deeply entrenched in their identity. On the contrary these programs allow citizens to participate in their local communities and improve education and health facilities to fight the persistent high poverty rates.

Chavez’s impact on government initiated participation is substantial; tying his impact on opposition initiatives with his social spending and grip on mineral resources of the country give him an unfair advantage in the election process.

¹⁵ Hawkins, Hansen 121
¹⁶ Corrales and Penfold 2007
¹⁷ Hawkins 5237
Between 2001 and 2003 the Chavez administration lost supporters in record numbers and the Venezuelan opposition grew strong, staging massive demonstrations in spite of many counter demonstrations, some of which sometimes included violence, from the Chavistas. In 2001 business and labor groups, and some civil society organizations even staged a two-day ‘civil stoppage’\(^\text{18}\), a response to Chavez’s threat to rule over public education sector by the decree, power he had already pronounced in the hydrocarbon and agricultural sector. According to Chavez critic, Amherst professor Javier Corrales, ‘the country was gripped by the worst polarization that Latin America had seen since the heyday of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua’\(^\text{19}\), which saw similar level of polarizations following the Nicaraguan revolution.

Hugo Chavez is not only widely criticized for his authoritarian leadership style but also for his 1992 coup attempt, trying to unseat Carlos Andrés Pérez’s government. This was proof to many that Chavez does not believe in democracy and that he cannot be trusted in keeping the military out of civilian politics. Pressure on Chavez continued to grow in the year 2002 when the economy shrank by 8.9\(^\%\)\(^\text{20}\) and in April 2002 Caracas was home to ‘one of the most massive civil protests in Latin American history’\(^\text{21}\), as business class leader Pedro Carmona aided by a faction of the military staged a coup that would remove Hugo Chavez from office for 2 days\(^\text{22}\). These protests are important to consider because they exemplify not only the polarization between pro, and anti-government forces, but also show that in Venezuela there is not only one

\(^{18}\) Corrales, Penfold, Venezuela: Crowding out the opposition, Journal of Democracy, 2007, pg. 102
\(^{19}\) Corrales, Penfold 102
\(^{20}\) World Bank estimate
\(^{21}\) Corrales, Penfold 102
\(^{22}\) Sylvia 73
side that undermines the principals of democracy. The discourse of the opposition, largely made up of middle sector and the business elites, ‘attempts to place the multitude on the side of the barbaric’. To show how the media and several ‘civil society initiatives’ also are politically affiliated and therefore not insulated, one has to look back at the previous mass uprising in Caracas on February 27th 1989 where thousands of protesters went on the streets to protest the imposed dismantling of the welfare state. The ‘media, however, managed to under-represent the number of victims resulting from the demonstrations’. The newspapers El Nacional and El Universal are the voice of Chavez’s opposition now and were favoring the foreign imposed neo-liberal policies in 1989. The accounts of El Nacional and El Universal after the 2002 coup attempt show that, in a similar protest now, the documentation was clearly different and politically affiliated. While in 1989, protesters were criticized for disrupting public order, the 2002 uprising were praised as bold. Even more alarming is the correlation of the description of the 1989 protesters and the Chavez supporters from the earlier discussed Bolivarian Circles that launched a massive counter revolution ranging from the slums of Caracas, to right in front of the presidential palace, urging a return of their elected president. The distinction fashioned by the media was between ‘civil society’ and the ‘chavista hordes’.

Manuel Caballero offers an illustrative example of the fear generated by the opposition as he compares the Bolivarian Circles to Duvalier’s Tontons Macoutes, which are known for their era state terrorism in Haiti from 1959 to 1970:

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23 Hérnandez 137
24 Hérnandez 138
25 Hérnandez 141
‘Our soldiers of chavismo are less similar to the Italian squadristi or the hitlerian SS, than to Duvalier’s tonton macoutes, including, as witnessed by all Venezuela, witchcraft’\textsuperscript{26}. Such comments affect over 10 million activists involved in several movements and just play into Chavez’s policy strategies. Of course, such rhetoric is not only found on the side of the opposition. In contrast, the Chavez administration is worldly known for its controversial rhetoric the latest insults, calling Henrique Capriles, the opposition front-runner in the 2012 presidential election a rightist radical. His grandmother, a Holocaust survivor and yet a Chavez supporter Miguez Perez states:

‘You can say what you want about your ancestors, but you are a nazi’ \textsuperscript{27}.

The previous discourses are an embodiment of the level of polarization in Venezuela. The rising polarization, along with Chavez’s new 1999 constitution, produced what scholars call a ‘high-stake power’ \textsuperscript{28} political system. This means that both the costs of being in opposition, and the advantages of being in office have greatly increased. The 1999 constitution strengthened the executive and gave the incumbency control over the attorney general, the comptroller general, the military, and most importantly, the National Electoral Council (CNE). These powers might give the incumbency an unfair advantage over the opposition, something that is further intensified by the government’s grasp on Venezuela’s huge oil resources which can be used to coopt the majority of the electorate through social spending. Political competition in Venezuela was on the rise as the 2002 failed coup attempt, the 2003 referendum, and the 2004 elections show. The opposition thought it could remove Chavez’s grasp on power, but because of a massive increase in state spending Chavez managed to retain the majority of the votes. State

\textsuperscript{26} Hérnandez 141, Caballero 2002
\textsuperscript{27} LA Times
\textsuperscript{28} Corrales, Penfold 101
spending in Venezuela creates a state that is ‘it is virtually impossible to defeat in voting’ because when it reaches a certain extent, ‘it begins to undermine democratic institutions, creating a playing field that is far from level’\textsuperscript{29}. The opposition voiced its frustration by boycotting the 2005 legislative elections, leaving every seat of the national assembly to be filled with a pro-Chavez candidate. This was largely due to allegations that argued that the government used fingerprint identification machines to retreat individual votes. Even though these allegations remained unconfirmed, they are aligned with the premise that the government wants to identify its supporters and align party support with services provided. Venezuela’s democracy in 2005 looked as polarized as ever and its future was in doubt.

\section*{At Crossroads:}

Following a detailed case study of the Bolivarian circles, and a look into the institutional settings of government-opposition relations, it is evident that Chavez’s rise to power resulted in a largely dependent and polarized civil society and an institutional setting that, rather than doing away with the stagnancy of the Punto Fijo democracy, created a system in which the stakes are increased, further reinforcing the concurrent theme of polarization. However, the causes of polarization cannot only be attributed to Chavez since the previous administrations left a power vacuum of massive poverty and inequality that was just demanding the emergence of a popular leader that centralizes power. The differing views about the Bolivarian circles explain the dilemma of Venezuelan politics. The Chavez administration fails to value the independence of civil society, trying to

\textsuperscript{29} Corrales, Penfold 106
control it through populist rhetoric and selective cooptation while the opposition is so caught up criticizing and alienating these participatory initiatives, that it is failing to realize that Chavez’s grip on power will not end unless poverty is reduced. The opposition needs to realize that it needs to be united and have a clear initiative against poverty. The recent elections, in which Henrique Capriles gained a respectable 45% of the vote show that despite all adversities, the opposition can challenge Chavez if they are united. Capriles is unique since he offered an administration in which redistributive policies and democratic values could go hand in hand. The growing ‘ambivalent middle’\textsuperscript{30} in Venezuela will be the key to successful democracy. Venezuela’s economic growth and higher social mobility will keep this middle class growing and it has to use its insulation from both the government and its coopting programs, and the business elite favoring of the status Punto Fijo to hold the government accountable and serve as agent for society. The essence of the role that civil society plays in Venezuelan society and how its democracy should be organized can only be truly understood from a broader, theoretical perspective. Venezuela, and most of Latin America, now stand at crossroads, ready to cast off its subordinate position in the world and finally end massive inequality resulting from exclusion. Democracy in Venezuela has to find a way to balance the inclusive advantages of participatory democracy with the institutional framework of a competitive party-system in liberal democracy. Civil society has to find a way to be the motor of such change neither being coopted by leftist nor excluded by the citizenship as consumption model of many neo-liberal conservatives. The polarized society created by Hugo Chavez lets grey look like black and white. Venezuela, and all of Latin America, has to stay away from generalizing, and excluding. The future of

\textsuperscript{30} Corrales, Penfold 107
democracy will be secured if Venezuela’s future starts to be one of compromise, balancing progress and equity.
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