

## **Deterioration and Polarization of Party Politics in Venezuela**

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For the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, party organizations dominated politics in Venezuela. Two main parties, the social democratic Acción Democrática (AD) and Christian democratic COPEI, alternated control of government, shaped policymaking, distributed resources, and monopolized state-society relations. Several left parties also maintained small, dedicated followings. Unlike many other countries in the region where low party system institutionalization has been a steady feature of politics, the Venezuelan party system was considered highly institutionalized and frequently lauded throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Kornblith and Levine 1995).

However, by the late 1980s AD and COPEI faced fundamental challenges that undermined their ability to link society and the state. As a result, the parties decayed. Over the 1990s, partisan identification with AD and COPEI declined by half, and the parties lost control of the presidency and legislature. In 1998, the two parties did not support their own candidates for president, and left-leaning outsider Hugo Chávez Frias swept to victory. Chávez's ascent signaled the complete collapse of the Venezuelan party system, as the traditional parties lost control of government and the system fundamentally changed its structure from an institutionalized 2.5-party system toward greater fragmentation, personalism and instability (Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012). These two processes of major party decay and party system transformation together define party system collapse.

With the traditional system's collapse, party politics and the political system more broadly have experienced traumatic and fundamental shifts. Rather than being dominated by two structured, well-established party organizations engaged in institutionalized patterns of democratic competition, the contemporary system features a multitude of comparatively weak parties. These parties compete in two coalitions, each encapsulating diverse interests unified

primarily by support for or opposition to the polarizing project of political and economic transformation advanced by Chávez. The old party system exhibited broad agreement on fundamental rules of the political game together with moderate ideological differences between parties. In contrast, the current context features conflict over foundational issues such as the nature of political competition, the legitimacy of elections and the value of democracy. Where individual leaders had traditionally faced strong incentives to work within the framework of existing national party organizations, today party organizations have limited influence. Instead, personalism and regionalism are central features of the political landscape. *Chavismo* anchors a highly bifurcated partisan environment that has generated a governance crisis amid intractable economic and security concerns, and the movement has increasingly focused its energies toward consolidating power through any means necessary rather than building effective representative institutions. Despite the pivotal role parties once played, political parties and the system of competition they form are no longer defining facets of politics in polarized, conflict-ridden Venezuela.

This chapter explores these shifts in Venezuelan party politics. I briefly describe the level of institutionalization and nature of state-society linkages under the old party system. Then I explain its collapse, discussing how challenges to the parties' core linkage strategies together with constraints that limited appropriate adaptation produced fundamental failures of representation leading to collapse. I follow by analyzing the contours of contemporary competition that emerged in response to the traditional system's failures. Here I discuss the defining facet of Venezuelan politics – the *chavista*-opposition divide in which contestation centers on fundamental differences concerning the rules of the game and control of the state. I then detail the uneven institutionalization of the current party system and conclude by discussing

potential future trajectories for Venezuelan party politics in a context where violations of liberal democratic norms and procedures have become commonplace.

### **Development and Consolidation of an Institutionalized Party System**

When Venezuela transitioned to democracy in 1958, parties were instrumental in establishing the new regime. To limit destabilizing conflict and alleviate the fears of domestic elites and foreign interests, the parties formulated pacts encouraging compromise and cooperation (Levine 1973). The pacted transition empowered the participating parties, including AD and COPEI, solidifying their role as primary intermediaries between state and society (Martz 1966). Immediately following the transition, multiparty competition characterized the system. But by 1973, a 2.5-party system consolidated, and the effective number of parties (ENP) in legislative elections hovered around 3 for the next 15 years.<sup>1</sup> AD and COPEI were the main players, but small left parties regularly won legislative representation as well, with Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) the most significant third party.

This 2.5-party system manifested a high level of institutionalization and employed multifaceted strategies for linking society and the state. The system's institutionalization has been well documented. Most importantly, interparty competition was stable with power alternating between two major parties that received consistent vote shares and electoral volatility below the regional average (Roberts and Wibbels 1999). The system also displayed the three major features of embeddedness that promote party system stability: parties with roots in society, legitimacy of parties, and strong party organizations (see chapter 1, this volume). First, AD and

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<sup>1</sup> ENP provides an estimate of the number of parties competing in a party system, weighting each party according to their share of the vote (or seats). The formula taken from Laakso and Taagepera (1979) is as follows, where  $P_i$  is the proportion of votes (or seats) won by the  $i^{\text{th}}$  party:

$$\text{ENP} = 1 / \sum_{i=1}^n P_i^2$$

COPEI maintained close and long-standing ties with important social groups and had bases of committed partisans. Second, parties had legitimacy in the eyes of both ordinary citizens and elites. Venezuelans joined parties at unusually high rates (Coppedge 1994), and politicians typically built their careers within existing parties. Third, party organizations manifested high levels of party discipline, routinized internal procedures, and nationwide reach (Kornblith and Levine 1995).

During its heyday, the party system also employed a diverse portfolio of linkage strategies – mechanisms by which parties connect society and the state (Kitschelt 2000; Lawson 1980). In terms of programmatic representation, the system provided policy responses to citizen concerns as well as moderate but distinct ideological options (Karl 1997; Morgan 2011). The system also incorporated the most significant group-based interests in Venezuelan society by maintaining close ties to major functional groups, including business, organized labor, peasants and middle class professionals. Offering policies and material benefits that were sectorally-targeted, representation in party organizations, and direct participation in policymaking, the parties integrated interests corresponding to the traditional class cleavage (Crisp 2000; Martz 1966; Martz and Myers 1994; McCoy 1989), which encapsulated a substantial majority of the population at the system's peak (Morgan 2011). The traditional parties also employed clientelist appeals, primarily to reach those not linked through programmatic representation or incorporation of functional interests.

Thus, while the party system was imperfect, in the 1970s and early 1980s it seemed stable, structured, legitimate and effectively linked to society. However, over the next decade the system entered a period of crisis, which culminated in major party decay and transformation of the system, first toward fragmented multiparty competition and now highly polarized

contestation featuring two coalitions competing across the *chavista*-opposition divide. Because the old system's weaknesses have structured post-collapse party politics in fundamental ways, understanding the post-collapse system requires explaining why the old system failed, a task to which I now turn.

### **Venezuelan Party System Collapse**

Support for AD and COPEI deteriorated dramatically during the 1990s, and by the end of the decade, the traditional party system ceased to exist. While over 70% of Venezuelans identified with AD and COPEI as late as 1988, affiliation with these parties underwent drastic decay beginning in 1989 and declined to less than 20% by the turn of the century (Morgan 2007). By 1998, the major parties also lost electoral support and governing power, together holding less than 50% of seats in Congress and losing the presidency in two consecutive elections. At the same time, party system dynamics underwent fundamental transformation, with an institutionalized 2.5-party system giving way to a more fluid, polarized multiparty system. This transformation of the established system together with the decay of its major component parties marked the collapse of the once venerated and seemingly stable Venezuelan party system. (See Morgan 2011 for full conceptualization and operationalization of party system collapse.)

### **Linkage Failure and Party System Collapse**

What caused the collapse of this institutionalized party system? The answer lies in the entire system's progressive failure to provide adequate linkage for the majority of Venezuelans. At its peak, the old system appealed to citizens through programmatic representation, interest representation based on incorporating major societal groups, and clientelism. However, beginning in the late 1980s, each of these strategies decayed, leaving many Venezuelans disconnected from the traditional system and in search of alternatives.

Using data from a national survey conducted in 1998,<sup>2</sup> I assess how loss of linkage affected partisan affiliation and electoral support for AD, COPEI and MAS. Multinomial logit analyses of partisanship as well as reported vote choice in the November 1998 congressional elections and intended vote in the December 1998 presidential election support the argument that Venezuelans without linkage were less likely to support the traditional parties. In particular, these analyses provide evidence that the deterioration of programmatic representation, group-based interest representation, and clientelism each played a central role in Venezuelans' decisions to abandon the traditional parties. Table 1 details the analysis of respondents' reported partisan identification, comparing supporters of the traditional parties to independents and those backing new parties on the right and the left. The analysis includes four independent variables to capture different facets of linkage failure, and all are significantly associated with reduced support for the traditional parties.<sup>3</sup> As the parties converged ideologically on the center-right, those on the left found little programmatic representation among the traditional parties and instead turned to new options, even favoring new parties of the right over the status quo. Likewise, those who rejected the system's performance on economic policymaking abandoned the traditional parties as they failed to offer responsiveness on the country's most pressing concerns. With regard to interest incorporation, those outside traditional functional groups turned toward options outside the system. Lastly, people likely to pursue clientelist forms of linkage and experience unmet demands did not support the old parties. Those without programmatic, incorporating or clientelist ties withdrew support and looked elsewhere for representation.

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<sup>2</sup> RedPol98 data collected November 13-28, 1997, and provided by Banco de Datos Poblacionales, Universidad Simón Bolívar. Venezuelan survey firm DATOS carried out the nationally representative, face-to-face survey, designed by Venezuelan scholars.

<sup>3</sup> See Table 1 for measurement details; for robustness checks see Morgan (2011) chapter 8.

**Table 1. How Linkage Failure Contributed to Party Decay: Multinomial Logit Analysis of Partisanship during System Collapse**

|   | <u>New Left</u> | <u>New Right</u> | <u>Independents</u> |
|---|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <b><u>Programmatic Representation</u></b>                           |                 |                  |                     |
| Negative Evaluations of Economic Policy Responsiveness <sup>a</sup> | .38**<br>(.13)  | .22<br>(.13)     | .16<br>(.14)        |
| Left Ideology <sup>b</sup>  | .33**<br>(.03)  | .11**<br>(.03)   | .19**<br>(.04)      |
| <b><u>Interest Incorporation</u></b>                                |                 |                  |                     |
| Outside Incorporated Groups <sup>c</sup>                            | .82**<br>(.22)  | .95**<br>(.24)   | 1.37**<br>(.26)     |
| <b><u>Clientelism</u></b>   |                 |                  |                     |
| Clientelist Demanding Constituency <sup>d</sup>                     | .50*<br>(.20)   | .16<br>(.21)     | .49*<br>(.21)       |
| Constant  | 2.54**<br>(.52) | 1.19*<br>(.55)   | .27<br>(.60)        |
| N (Model Significance)  |                 | 1500 (.00)       |                     |
| Log Likelihood  |                 | -1454.49         |                     |
| Likelihood Ratio (d.f.)   |                 | 299.6 (30)       |                     |
| Pseudo R-squared  |                 | .09              |                     |

Note: Data are from the 1998 RedPol survey. Question wording for dependent variable: “With which party do you sympathize?” Reference category is respondents affiliated with AD, COPEI or MAS. New left includes MVR, PPT, and LCR. New right includes Convergencia, Movimiento IRENE, and Proyecto Venezuela.

<sup>a</sup> Question: “What do you think about the economic policy of the current government? Would you say that this economic policy has been very good, good, bad or very bad?” Higher values indicate more negative assessments.

<sup>b</sup> Question: “In politics, people talk about ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Thinking in general terms, where would you locate yourself on this scale from left to right?” 1=right; 10=left.

<sup>c</sup> Question: “Do you belong to a union, guild or professional association?” Non-members coded as being outside traditionally incorporated groups.

<sup>d</sup> Measured by identifying groups of respondents most likely to lack economic certainty and therefore to seek clientelist exchanges. Frustrated clients are thus people who were unemployed or who possessed unskilled or unstable employment, such as street vendors, chauffeurs, taxi drivers, etc.

Standard errors in parentheses, \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

Analysis conducted using the Amelia multiple imputation program (King et al. 2001) with the Clarify package in STATA 10. The analysis also included sociotropic and pocketbook economic evaluations, which had no significant effects, as well as controls for class, education, age and sex.

## Explaining Linkage Failure

But why did linkage fail? How did a party system with a rich array of established linkage strategies experience devastating incapacity to maintain these ties? System-wide linkage deteriorated because structural challenges, largely stemming from the exhaustion of the statist

economic model and the advent of neoliberalism (see Roberts 2014), threatened the system's core linkage strategies, and because organizational and resource constraints limited parties' successful adaptation in the face of these challenges (Morgan 2011). Given that different linkage strategies are vulnerable to distinct risks, understanding the dynamics of Venezuelan collapse requires specifying the precise kinds of challenges and constraints that undermined each linkage type and made programmatic representation, interest incorporation, and clientelism broadly ineffective not just for one party but across the entire system.

### *Programmatic Decay*

At its peak, the Venezuelan party system provided programmatic representation via policy responsiveness on salient valence issues and ideological differentiation between parties (Bolívar 2001; Morgan 2011). But in the 1980s, the country entered a period of severe economic crisis characterized by inflation, unemployment, and plummeting and then stagnant oil prices (OPEC 2003; Karl 1997). By the late 1990s, average wages had fallen to one-third their 1982 level (CEPAL 2008) and poverty had more than doubled, surpassing 60% (CISOR 2001). The parties needed to intensify their efforts to resolve these issues, but because the crisis was rooted in exhaustion of the oil-based development model, conventional policy tools were ineffective, making innovation simultaneously necessary and difficult. As conditions deteriorated, the parties encountered mounting constraints on policymaking imposed by the depletion of foreign reserves, debt crisis, and the international neoliberal consensus. Presidents Carlos Andres Pérez (1989-1993) and Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) both signed IMF agreements (Gómez Calcaño 1998), which restricted policymaking to options that were unpopular and at odds with the parties' traditional stances favoring state intervention and social protection.

While both presidents accepted neoliberalism, contradictions between the parties' ideals and these policies created confusion and inaction for the party organizations (Corrales 2002; Interviews)<sup>4</sup>. As a result, the parties took few steps to address the deteriorating situation. Although overall policy activity increased in the 1990s, policy responsiveness on the country's most pressing problems declined to half that experienced during the party system's height in the mid-1970s (Morgan 2011, Figs. 5.2 & 5.3). Rather than stepping up their efforts to confront the crisis, the parties "had no answer for the people. There was no response to their problems" (Interview 67). Public opinion surveys clearly indicated rising frustration with this policy unresponsiveness – nearly 90% of Venezuelans held negative evaluations of party efforts to solve the country's problems by the time the system collapsed.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that valence responsiveness evaporated, the major system parties failed to offer ideological options to voters, eliminating any potential within-system alternative. By the late 1990s, the two parties were ideologically indistinguishable (Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012), and interparty agreements created the appearance of collusion within the political establishment (Lupu 2014; Morgan 2011). Instead, a neoliberal consensus emerged among the traditional parties. Despite initial resistance to the economic reform agenda of their co-partisan President Perez among some sectors of AD (Corrales 2002), by the late 1990s the party supported President Caldera in his turn toward the IMF (Interviews). Thus, AD came to occupy the same ideological space as COPEI (Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012),<sup>6</sup> and 70 percent of Venezuelans saw AD and

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<sup>4</sup> The author interviewed 89 party leaders, politicians, and other experts during May 2001, April-December 2003, and June-July 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Data from Consultores21 quarterly public opinion surveys based on national urban samples of about 1500 respondents. Question: "How much do you think that political parties are working to resolve the principle problems of the country; a lot, somewhat, a little, not at all?" Over 1994 to 1998, 86-90% of respondents fell into the bottom two categories.

<sup>6</sup> Based on public opinion data from Baloyra 1973, Batoba 1983, and RedPol 1998, which asked Venezuelans to place the parties on the left-right spectrum.

COPEI as indistinguishable.<sup>7</sup> Moreover historical patterns of pact-making (Navarro 1995) and intra-party conflict (Coppedge 1994) created incentives for party leaders to form interparty alliances during the crisis years of the 1990s. By the end of Caldera's presidency, AD, COPEI and many smaller parties had collaborated in formal or informal cross-party agreements (de los Ángeles 2001). These alliances obscured the parties' ideological positions, creating the perception that no traditional party offered an alternative to neoliberalism (Lupu 2014; Morgan 2011, 116-20). Even parties typically associated with the left, including MAS and La Causa R, joined alliances with AD, COPEI and/or Caldera's Convergencia during the five years preceding collapse, minimizing their credibility as meaningful alternatives (Morgan 2011, 118-9). As a result of ideological convergence and apparent collaboration among established parties, dissatisfied voters, particularly those on the left, had to look outside the system to find distinct programmatic appeals. Together crisis of the economic model, international policy pressures that conflicted with established policy strategies, and interparty agreements undermined valence responsiveness and limited programmatic options across the system.

### *Narrowing Incorporation*

The parties had also traditionally maintained strong ties to major functional groups by offering them an array of benefits including sectorally-targeted policies and resources, descriptive representation within party organizations, and privileged influence in policymaking. But the utility of these ties deteriorated as society transformed during the 1990s as Venezuela endured economic crisis and neoliberal reform. Incorporated groups like public employees and unionized workers shrank, while excluded sectors, including informal and unemployed workers, expanded. The share of the workforce in unions declined by over 50% between the early 1980s

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<sup>7</sup> Data from 1993 IVAD survey.

and late 1990s, and the public sector shrank by one-third. Meanwhile, the informal and unemployed grew to 60% of the labor force (Table 2). In fact, Venezuela experienced one of the most dramatic increases in informality across the developing world (ILO 2001). These changes reflected fundamental societal restructuring away from the worker-owner cleavage and toward a formal-informal divide, which pitted comparatively privileged formal sectors against growing masses living in economic uncertainty. This restructuring threatened the entire system of incorporation as none of the old parties could easily appeal to the expanding informal sector through established mechanisms of group-based representation, demanding significant adaptation to accommodate these groups through interest incorporation (as opposed to resorting to clientelism).

**Table 2. Transformation of Venezuelan Society between 1980 and 1998**

|  | <i>Early 1980s</i>                     | <i>Late 1990s</i> |
|--|--|-------------------|
|  | <b>Percentage of Total Labor Force</b> |                   |
| <b>Traditionally Incorporated Groups</b>   |  |                   |
| Union members <sup>a</sup>                 | 40%                                    | 15%               |
| Public Sector <sup>b</sup>                 | 22%                                    | 16%               |
| <b>Traditionally Unincorporated Groups</b> |  |                   |
| Informal Sector <sup>b</sup>               | 34%                                    | 49%               |
| Unemployed <sup>b</sup>                    | 6%                                     | 11%               |

<sup>a</sup> Early 1980s from ILO; 1995 from ILO. The estimate for the 1980s is conservative; some sources place unionization as high as 45% (Díaz 2000).  
<sup>b</sup> 1980s data for 1980 from OCEI; 1990s data for 1998 from Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

However, two organizational constraints incentivized maintenance of established incorporation strategies and impeded successful adaptation. First, the diffuse structure and heterogeneity of the informal sector (Ellner 2003; Roberts 2014) did not fit entrenched patterns of incorporation, which were adapted to accommodate hierarchically organized traditional class-based interests (Buxton 1999; Crisp 2000; Levitsky 2007). Second, informal sector interests frequently conflicted with those of incorporated formal sector groups, forcing parties to choose

between maintaining established ties and building new ones (Iranzo and Patruyo 2001; Roberts 2003). These organizational features made informal sector integration through group-based mechanisms of incorporation challenging and risky, because such incorporation would require innovation and could alienate traditional supporters. Rather than risk losing their base for an uncertain return, the parties and their formal sector allies largely ignored the burgeoning sectors without stable sources of income and instead relied on clientelist exchanges to provide linkage to these groups (Salamanca 1995; author interviews). As one former AD leader explained, the parties had “no tactic to incorporate [the growing informal sector] and never tried to organize or include them” (author interview). In fact, all but one of the former AD, COPEI and MAS leaders I interviewed were unable to identify a single strategy their party pursued to extend group-based linkage to the informal sector.

As a result, the portion of society integrated through interest incorporation narrowed considerably. The popular sector was left “without an effective voice” (Lander 1996, 67), and marginalized groups bore the brunt of the economic crisis, with the informal sector experiencing poverty at quadruple the rate of formal sector workers (Orlando 2001; Riutort 1999). This marginalization pushed those in excluded groups to abandon the traditional parties at a considerably higher pace than incorporated sectors (Morgan 2011, 145-147). By the mid-1990s, poor Venezuelans were much more critical of party performance than the rich,<sup>8</sup> and the share of public sector workers supporting AD and COPEI was nearly twice that of unemployed or self-employed workers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>  $p < .05$ . A statistically significant class divide was not evident in evaluations of other institutions, including Congress, Supreme Court, and military.

<sup>9</sup>  $p < .01$ . Calculation based on nationwide public opinion surveys conducted by DATOS. Measuring informality using surveys from this time-period is not feasible, but the great majority of Venezuelan informal sector workers are self-employed, making self-employment a reasonable proxy for informality.

### *Clientelist Exhaustion*

Clientelist capacity also deteriorated in the years preceding party system collapse. Traditionally, clientelism linked the poor and otherwise excluded to the state, but as programmatic representation and incorporation decayed, the parties relied increasingly on clientelist exchanges to provide linkage. Clientelism involves delivery of immediate tangible benefits in exchange for political support. As a result, clients typically look for parties to meet some basic need and frequently lack long time horizons. Therefore, clientelism is particularly susceptible to situations in which demands for benefits outstrip supply (Piattoni 2001).

During the 1990s, social changes and political decentralization heightened clientelist demands at the same time that economic crisis and state reforms constrained the parties' ability to deliver. Venezuela experienced the most dramatic increase in poverty of any Latin American country between the early 1980s and late 1990s (CEPAL 2008), and the once-sizeable middle class lost half its purchasing power (Baptista 1997). Heightened poverty and uncertainty drove more Venezuelans to seek immediate, tangible clientelist exchanges (Interviews; *El Nacional*, January 14, 1997, D-5; *El Nacional* October 30, 1998, D-2). At the same time, decentralizing reforms established separate subnational elections, requiring parties to invest more clientelist resources to compete in hundreds of new municipal and regional contests (Lalander 2004). Moreover, as subnational elites gained autonomy, they demanded control over resources to support their own ambitions rather than using them to build support for the central party (Interviews; Grindle 2000; Sabatini 2003).

As clientelist demand expanded, resources dried up. In the face of precipitous drops in state revenue and escalating debt obligations, public spending per capita declined two-thirds and social spending dropped by 75% between 1981 and 1996 (Fernández 2003; Saínz 2005). These

reductions in state resources, particularly in social programs frequently used for clientelist distribution, undermined the parties' capacity to furnish benefits (Fernandes 2010, 74-79; Interviews; *El Nacional*, 2 September 1995, D-2; *El Nacional*, 12 January 1998, D-2). Moreover, neoliberal reforms and efforts to promote technocratic decision-making reduced public sector employment and restricted partisan manipulation of state funds, stripping parties of much-needed resources (Interviews; *El Nacional*, 15 December 1990, D-1; Baptista 2005). Given the mismatch between clientelist demand and capacity, the parties' last form of linkage was insufficient to shoulder the burden left by deteriorating programmatic representation and group-based incorporation.

Structural challenges to all three linkage strategies together with constraints on appropriate adaptation produced significant decay in the system's linkage capacity. As a result, Venezuelans' commitment to the political establishment frayed, and many who lacked linkage looked elsewhere for representation, producing party system collapse. Similar patterns of linkage decay caused by fundamental structural changes and constraints on adaptation also explain party system decay in place as diverse as Italy, Bolivia and Colombia (Morgan 2011, 205-240).

Some explanations of party system collapse in Venezuela and elsewhere argue that frustration with corruption was instrumental in causing collapse (e.g. Seawright 2012). In Venezuela, however, the popular attitude toward corruption was "soft and tolerant" until the economic crisis became acute and linkage deteriorated (Romero 1997, 19). In the absence of benefits from the state, more and more people became critical of clientelism for serving the interests of a select few. As a former AD leader explained, "there came a time when resources were not sufficient, and the party could not satisfy demands, but the people thought the money just stayed at the top in the hands of the politicians" (Interview). Because the parties did not

fulfill linkage expectations, frustration grew, and accusations of corruption, real and imagined, mounted. Public opinion surveys confirm the view that significant frustration with corruption emerged only after linkage decay was well underway. In surveys conducted from the 1970s through the 1990s, Venezuelans identified the most important problem confronting the country, and corruption did not emerge as a top issue in these surveys until the onset of economic crisis and linkage decay in the 1990s. In a 1994 survey conducted by Consultores 21, a majority of Venezuelans evaluated President Caldera's anti-corruption efforts positively, but by 1997, 87 percent thought he was failing to combat corruption. Escalating perceptions of corruption were a symptom of linkage decay, which intensified the implications of representational failures for the party system.

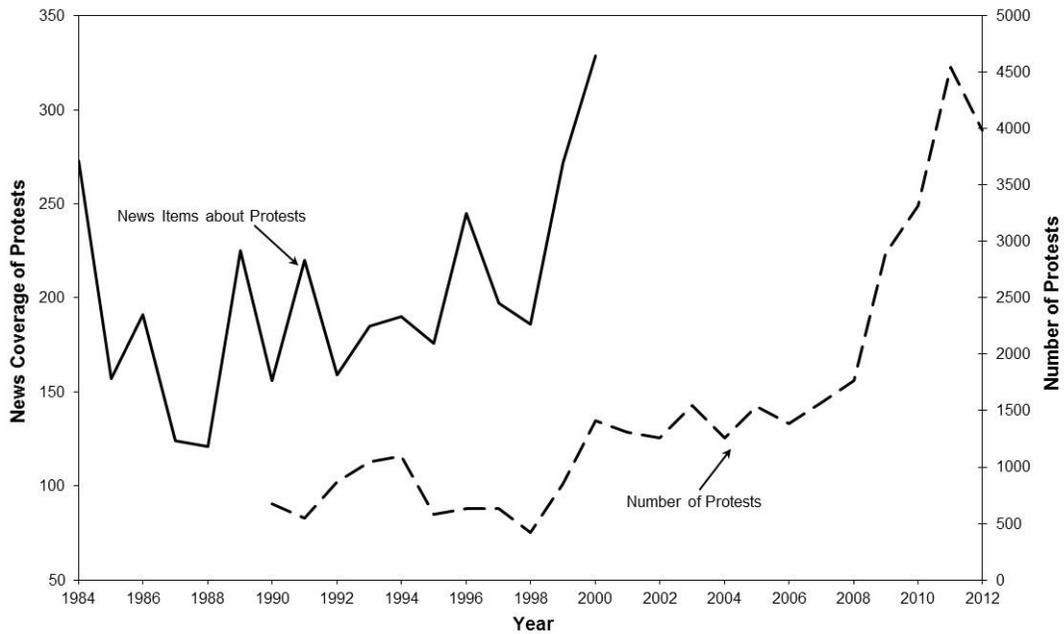
Other accounts have focused on the significance of economic dependence on oil (e.g. Karl 1997) and rigid organizations (e.g. Burgess and Levitsky 2003; Coppedge 1994) in understanding Venezuelan party dynamics. The account here views these factors as relevant indirectly via their effects on the system's capacity to maintain linkage. The fluctuations of Venezuela's oil based economy created important challenges for programmatic representation and clientelist linkages, while organizational inflexibility limited the parties' capacity to incorporate the interests of rapidly growing, but traditionally excluded social groups. However, the core cause of collapse was linkage decay, which weakened Venezuelans' commitment to existing parties and motivated them to abandon the system.

### **Post-Collapse Party Politics: Polarization and Personalism**

The implications of party system collapse for the nature of interparty competition and for politics more broadly have been profound. Conflict, volatility and uncertainty characterized Venezuelan party politics following collapse. At the old system's zenith, parties effectively

managed diverse interests, but as linkage deteriorated, conflict increased. After collapse, Venezuela lacked organizations able to channel disputes effectively, and contentious conflict became commonplace. As displayed in Figure 1, protest activity escalated following collapse and then plateaued before surging again in 2009. Political contestation no longer focused on ordinary policy differences debated within established institutions, and instead turned toward absolutist goals pursued through extraordinary strategies. For instance, Hugo Chávez and his allies rewrote the constitution in 1999, restructuring many institutions, and the opposition (unsuccessfully) sought to unseat Chávez through drastic methods including the 2002 coup, 2002-2003 general strike, and 2004 recall referendum. Heightened conflict and adversarial interactions continue to characterize Venezuelan politics more than 15 years after party system collapse, as new waves of protest and repression frequently erupt.

**Figure 1. Protest Activity in Venezuela, 1984-2012**



Source: Protests from *Situación de los derechos humanos* (PROVEA). News items from *El Bravo Pueblo Database* (López Maya and Lander 2005, 95).  
 Note: Each year corresponds to October of the preceding year through September of the year indicated. In other words the number of protests reported here for 1999 corresponds to the period October 1998 through September 1999.

Collapse also heightened party system fragmentation and volatility. At its peak, the traditional system consistently featured about 2.5 effective presidential parties and three legislative parties. By the 1990s, the effective number of parties ballooned to more than five and remained elevated for over a decade. Electoral instability also spiked in 1998, as presidential volatility approached 75 (on a 100-point scale) and legislative volatility surpassed 40.<sup>10</sup> Volatility stayed high through the mid-2000s, with levels far exceeding the pre-collapse average of 20. (See Figures 2 and 3 below). However, by 2010 the parties coalesced into two major coalitions, with one major alliance on each side of the pro- and anti-Chávez. The effective number of electoral coalitions (rather than parties) in the most recent presidential and legislative elections was 2.4 and 2.2 respectively. Thus while conflict continues to achieve new extremes in both level and intensity, the struggle occurs between two poles that maintain steady support.

### **Major Competitors in the Post-Collapse System**

#### *Chavistas*

While the nature of the post-collapse system has fluctuated over time, one component has remained constant – *chavismo*. Hugo Chávez Frías and his Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) emerged in 1998 as the primary alternative to the failed party system. Much of Chávez’s initial success can be attributed to his ability to attract support from those who saw their ties to the traditional parties deteriorate in the decade preceding collapse. In effect, Chávez offered linkage in areas where the old parties had failed (Morgan 2011).

As the old parties did not resolve pressing economic and social ills, including cost of living, unemployment, crime and corruption, Chávez pledged to address these very issues. His commitments resonated with voters critical of the traditional parties’ performance (Morgan

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<sup>10</sup> Volatility is calculated by summing the absolute values of the change in seat shares won by each party from one election to the next, and then dividing by two (Pedersen 1983).

2007). Once in power, Chávez endeavored to follow through on his commitments, and in his first five years in office, legislation focusing on the country's most important problems experienced a four-fold increase over such efforts during the final decade of the old system (Morgan 2011).

Moreover, while the old system converged ideologically and in the end failed to offer meaningful alternatives to a center-right consensus, Chávez presented a viable option on the left. This position gave him an edge over his main opponent in 1998, Henrique Salas Romer of the right-leaning Proyecto Venezuela. In the 1998 RedPol survey conducted immediately preceding Chávez's victory, respondents gave MVR an average score of 3.78 on a 10-point ideology scale where one indicates left and 10 right. This score placed MVR significantly to the left of AD, COPEI, and Proyecto Venezuela, which averaged statistically indistinguishable scores of 6.47, 6.51 and 6.62 respectively. Chavez's ideological positioning appealed to those on the left frustrated with the evaporation of programmatic options from the party system, and 76% of people with left ideologies voted for Chávez in 1998 (Molina 2002).

Chavismo, now under the banner of MVR's successor the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV – United Socialist Party of Venezuela), continues to stake out a position on the left. In the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey,<sup>11</sup> PSUV identifiers averaged a score of 3.55 on the 10-point ideology scale, and experts agree with this left placement. In the Democracy and Accountability Project's (DALP) expert survey, PSUV scored an average of 3.42 on the same 10-point scale.<sup>12</sup> The presence of a significant left option marks a major shift in the structure of Venezuelan party competition.

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<sup>11</sup> Survey conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Nationwide samples are gathered through face-to-face interviews in the respondent's preferred language, with sample sizes typically around 1500. I am grateful to LAPOP and its major supporters (United States Agency for International Development, United Nations Development Program, Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.

<sup>12</sup> Venezuela expert data were gathered between May 2007 and December 2008.

Substantively, although the ideology and composition of *chavismo* reflect varied influences, it has a clear statist orientation opposing the neoliberalism that ultimately dominated policymaking in the old system (Corrales 2010). Initially, the party's ideals seemed quite reminiscent of the state-led model of growth advanced by AD during the oil boom years. But as Chávez fought off adversaries, consolidated power and then announced a shift toward “21<sup>st</sup> century socialism” in January 2005, leftist tendencies in MVR and later PSUV intensified (López Maya 2011). Since Chávez's death in March 2013, Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro has not reversed this tendency.

In addition to filling the opening available on the ideological left, Chávez built support appealing to those increasingly marginalized by the old system's incorporation strategies. As the class cleavage restructured around the formal-informal divide and the traditional parties failed to maintain linkage with the growing numbers of Venezuelans falling into poverty and informality, Chávez and MVR catered to these groups. MVR leaders saw how the old parties' inability to adapt their linkage strategies and integrate these groups gave Chávez an opening and provided critical support (Interviews). Public opinion surveys corroborate that the poor and informal sector are core chavista constituencies. As Chávez rose to power, poor Venezuelans were consistently more enthusiastic than the wealthy (Canache 2002; Molina 2002). Although Chávez enjoyed support from wide swaths of society when he was first elected in 1998, including segments of the upper-middle class and even some business elites, he captured the votes of the poor and lower-middle sectors by the widest margins (Hellinger 2003). Moreover, when Chávez faced challenges from a coup attempt in 2002, an extended general strike in 2002-2003 and a recall referendum in 2004, the poor and informal sector provided an important reservoir of

support preserving Chávez's tenure (Canache 2007; Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 166-179; López Maya and Meléndez 2007; McGuire 2014; Interviews).

Those marginalized due to the old system's inflexible incorporation strategies continue to form an integral part of the chavista base (García-Guadilla 2005; Handlin 2013a; Valencia Ramírez 2005, 95). In the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey, Venezuelans who identified with PSUV had levels of household wealth and income significantly lower than those of opposition identifiers. PSUV supporters also had darker skin and fewer years of education than opposition supporters. In a recent region-wide analysis of class voting, Venezuelans outside traditionally incorporated groups clearly favored the chavista option, and the country manifested one of the widest income gaps in Latin American voting behavior, with poor Venezuelans 42 percentage points more likely than the rich to support Chávez in 2006 (Mainwaring, Somrá and Torcal 2015). The geographical distribution of votes provides additional evidence concerning the class divide in Venezuelan politics. Chávez and now Maduro have consistently won by wide margins in poor neighborhoods and regions, while the opposition has fared better in wealthy areas (CNE 2013; López Maya and Meléndez 2007, 283-284). For instance in the 2013 presidential election, Maduro received 50.6% of the vote nationally, but in Portuguesa, one of the poorest states, his vote share was 65.4%. Alternatively, in the wealthy oil state of Zulia, he won only 47.7% of the vote (CNE 2013). This pattern of disproportionate support persists if we compare poor and wealthy neighborhoods within urban centers (García-Guadilla 2005). In Caracas' 23 de Enero parish, one Latin America's oldest housing projects, 62.5% of voters supported Maduro, while his vote share in wealthy Chacao was just 17% (CNE 2013). Likewise in the 2015 legislative elections, PSUV and its allies garnered only 40.9% of the vote nationwide, but won comfortable majorities in poor states like Portuguesa (53.7%) and Delta Amacuro (58.6%). Of course, the

poor, informal sector, and victims of racial/ethnic discrimination are not the only elements of the PSUV base; the party also receives backing from small but vibrant elements of the working and middle classes (Cyr 2013; Ellner 2013) and from new economic elites who have benefited from affiliation with the government. But the distinctive and by far the largest component of the party's base come from those who bore the brunt of the economic crisis and fell into poverty and informality, placing them outside groups traditionally incorporated by the old system.

Chavismo has carefully cultivated support from the previously marginalized through social policies aimed at historically excluded groups (Fernandes 2010, 82-86). For instance, the extensive set of programs developed under the general label *Misiones* target the poor through benefits such as job training, health care, literacy programs, and affordable foodstuffs (Penfold-Becerra 2007). These programs often do not involve overt conditional exchanges and are therefore not explicitly clientelist in nature (Handlin 2013b; Hawkins 2010). However, when oil revenues were high there was a significant expansion of discretionary spending channeled toward these programs (Corrales 2010, 36), which were designed to target likely supporters, prioritizing the impact on elections over social outcomes (Hawkins 2010; McGuire 2014, 13-14; Penfold-Becerra 2007).<sup>13</sup> Linkage for those ignored by the entrenched political elite together with chavismo's left ideology provided a major alternative to the old system, which not only enabled Chávez's rise to power but have also helped sustain the movement even after his death.

In addition to these programmatic and group-based appeals capitalizing on linkage gaps left by the old system, Chávez built a personal following employing his status as a political outsider, populist discourse, and charisma. His powerful persona drew many to support chavismo, and his approach has fundamentally altered the content and structure of political

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<sup>13</sup> This pattern is similar to the traditional parties' targeting spending toward core constituencies in organized labor, peasant, professional and business associations.

contestation in Venezuela, although these tactics made the party and the entire movement dependent upon his influence and shaped by his whims (López Maya 2011; Pereira Almao 2004). His populist discourse promised to disrupt established patterns of competition, upend the policy status quo and advance popular will, claims appealing to voters frustrated with the representational failures of the ossified party system (Hawkins 2010). Once in power, chavista policymaking followed a populist logic, designed to circumvent established structures and build support for the movement and especially its leader (Hawkins 2010).

Thus, chavismo possesses a complex and effective linkage portfolio based on the charismatic legacy of its founder as well as substantive appeals that facilitated a strong base of core supporters and prolonged control of the state. Chavismo's linkage effectiveness is apparent in the strength and magnitude of support for the movement. The PSUV has boasted more than 7 million members, which represents nearly a quarter of the Venezuelan population (Kutiyski and Krouwel 2014). While this estimate likely overstates the number of truly committed party activists, it represents a significant level of partisan identification, particularly in a region and country that has experienced so much party decay in recent decades. Public opinion data supports the conclusion that the party attracts considerable amounts of support in comparison to other parties in Venezuela and across Latin America. In the 2012 AmericasBarometer, nearly 10 times as many Venezuelans – 27.4 percent of the sample – identified with PSUV than with any other party.<sup>14</sup> In historical perspective, this ranks PSUV around the same level of support AD enjoyed when the traditional 2.5-party system was consolidating in the early 1970s and consistently above rates of identification with COPEI throughout the peak years of the system.

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<sup>14</sup> Identification with all chavista parties was 29.2%. Primero Justicia had the second highest number of supporters, with just 3.1% of the sample, and all opposition partisans combined constituted 8.9% of respondents.

Within Latin America, only three parties found greater levels of partisan support than the PSUV in 2012 (FSLN in Nicaragua, Frente Amplio in Uruguay, and PLD in Dominican Republic).<sup>15</sup>

Even after Chávez's death, as oil prices plummeted and the economy unraveled, 19.3% of Venezuelan respondents in the 2014 AmericasBarometer identified with PSUV, which still placed the party among the top ten in the region. In comparison, the opposition party with the largest partisan base was Primero Justicia at 2.7%, and the MUD alliance and all its constituent parties attracted 18.2% of Venezuelans.<sup>16</sup> These most recent data suggest that PSUV support is more than superficial, as the party has retained a significant core base even while inflation has escalated beyond control and shortages are commonplace.

However, party organizational development lags behind the strength of chavista linkage and identity, despite recent efforts to build up the movement in this regard. Chávez did not initially invest in developing or institutionalizing a party (Hawkins 2003; Meijas and Tarazón 2002) and instead utilized various organizational vehicles. PSUV's origins are in the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR 200), an organization within the military established in 1983 by several junior officers including Chávez who was the most influential and charismatic. The organization grew gradually and built ties to civilian allies on the left, eventually attempting a coup against Carlos Andrés Pérez in February 1992. While this effort was unsuccessful, it formed the foundation for Chávez's eventual ascendance and provided him a platform to criticize the establishment. When Chávez decided to enter the electoral arena, MVR<sup>17</sup> was founded as a political party to launch his 1998 candidacy (Hawkins 2010, 16-18; López

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Sam Handlin for this observation.

<sup>16</sup> Excluding those identifying with the generic MUD alliance, only 6.7% of Venezuelans identified with an opposition party in 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Election law, which prohibits the use of national symbols in party names, necessitated the name shift from MBR to MVR, which in Spanish are pronounced identically.

Maya 2011, 214-216; Pereira Almas 2004). Given its origins as an electoral vehicle, MVR never overcame its “electoral and personalist logic” (López Maya 2011, 217). The party remained weak and Chávez retained decisive influence over the organization (Harnecker 2004; Hellinger 2005). This centralization and personalization of power helped control internal conflict and suited the movement’s populist orientation, which relies heavily on direct ties between leader and supporters (López Maya 2011; Hawkins 2010). Chávez’s candidacies in 1998, 2000 and 2006 were also supported by an array of left parties under the Polo Patriótico alliance, which included Patria Para Todos (PPT), Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV), Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo, and even MAS (Pereira Almas 2004).<sup>18</sup>

To counter the institutional weaknesses of MVR and the scattered nature of the movement, Chávez announced the creation of a new political party, PSUV, in December 2006 (Handlin 2013b). This new organization was intended to replace MVR and subsume the diverse array of parties that supported the government (Hawkins 2010, 24). While many small parties dissolved and joined PSUV, several of the most important coalition partners, including PCV and PPT, elected to retain separate identities, initially drawing Chávez’s ire before being welcomed back into the alliance (Alvarez 2007; López Maya 2011). Although PSUV has made significant recent efforts to strengthen its organizational structure, the routinization of party operations remains low, and formal rules and procedures often lack sway in the face of internal power struggles between influential personalities.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the heterogeneity of the chavista movement imposes significant challenges to strengthening PSUV, which must compete with chavista organizations outside the party (e.g.

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<sup>18</sup> Following the 2000 election, MAS left the Chávez coalition and joined the opposition, although a remnant calling itself PODEMOS remained with Chávez until 2007. PPT also left the coalition briefly in 2001, returned in 2002, and remained until a 2012 split when one faction left.

<sup>19</sup> See section below on institutionalization of party organizations for more details.

Bolivarian circles, 2001-2004; Comando Maisanta, 2003-2004; community councils, 2006-2010) (Ellner 2013; Hawkins 2010; Pereira Almao 2004). Grassroots organizations, like community radio stations and local cooperatives, also operate independently of the party and often pursue different goals (Fernandes 2010). These extra-party alternatives, both those originating from grassroots efforts and those initiated by chavista elites, lend vitality and complexity to the movement and facilitate mobilization. However, because the party often exists in tension not harmony with these groups, they have not enabled the organization to develop deep roots in society (Fernandes 2007; Hawkins 2010; Pereira Almao 2004).

PSUV also suffers from internal divisions. One major divide pits the militarist branch, which primarily emphasizes nationalism, against civilian leftists, who are more ideologically motivated (Pereira Almao 2004). Another fissure, which partially cuts across the first, sets movement hardliners against moderates favoring dialogue with the opposition. While alive, Chávez used his personal power to bridge these divides, a strategy that minimized outright conflict but also enervated party-building efforts. Since Chávez's death, the party has weathered these latent conflicts despite the absence of his powerful persona, due in large part to electoral incentives and the threat posed by the anti-Chávez opposition. But in the long-term, power struggles within the movement pose challenges for the party.

### *The Opposition*

Since party system collapse, politics has polarized around the persona and now the legacy of Chávez, and the country is sharply divided between supporters and opponents of the chavista goal of transforming Venezuelan economic, social and political power structures. People left outside the established hierarchy for whom traditional party linkages failed have tended to support MVR/PSUV or one of the smaller parties in the Polo Patriótico. Alternatively, the broad

coalition comprising the anti-chavismo opposition draws support from those who reject chavismo's perceived hegemony and fear its efforts to upend conventional power structures and liberal democratic norms (Valencia Ramírez 2005). This rejection of chavismo is the opposition's most important feature and its unifying force.

Significant diversity coexists within the opposition. The *mélange* includes all the surviving parties from the pre-collapse system, including AD, COPEI and MAS, as well as many newcomers. The parties span a wide ideological space, ranging from Bandera Roja on the far left, Un Nuevo Tiempo near the center, and Proyecto Venezuela on the right. Individual opposition parties have niches in particular regions of the country or among certain types of supporters. For instance, COPEI is dominant Táchira state, La Causa R (LCR) in Amazonas, and Proyecto Venezuela in Carabobo (Sagarzazu 2011), and while Primero Justicia draws much of its support from middle class professionals (Pérez Baralt 2004), LCR tends to represent sectors of the organized working class (Salamanca 2004). However, no opposition party is particularly effective at appealing to the poor or informal sector, and the opposition fares better in urban areas than rural ones (Corrales 2010). Overall, the opposition is best understood not by who or what it stands for, but by what it stands against.

Despite the shared objective of defeating chavismo, the opposition has experienced persistent infighting regarding time horizons and strategies for achieving this goal. A radical faction favors immediate results and advocates more dramatic, often extra-institutional tactics. The moderate wing has shown more patience, is typically amenable to dialogue, and is more willing to operate within regime-established rules. In the years immediately following Chávez's ascendance, the radical faction had the upper hand in setting the opposition's agenda. During this period, elements of the opposition staged a coup in April 2002, participated in a general strike

that shut down much of the economy from December 2002 through February 2003, organized more than 150 protest marches from 2001 to 2003, petitioned for a referendum to recall Chávez, dismissed the referendum's results as fraudulent, and boycotted the 2005 legislative elections (Alvarez 2007; García-Guadilla 2005; Hsieh et al. 2009, 3-4; López Maya and Lander 2007, 5-6). However, following the failed recall referendum and the strategic miscalculation of boycotting the 2005 elections, which left the opposition without any legislative representation, many began to reconsider these tactics. As a result, power shifted toward moderate opposition voices who advocated dialogue with chavismo, participating in elections and accepting their outcomes as legitimate (Cyr 2012; López Maya and Lander 2007). With the opposition's unsuccessful efforts to win a majority of the national vote in presidential and subnational elections held after Chávez's death, frustrated radicals began to take independent actions that contradicted the mainstream opposition's more conciliatory tone and undermined dialogue with the government. Most recently, anti-chavistas have employed a two-pronged strategy, by pursuing influence through elections and by seeking to destabilize the regime through protests and other efforts to force President Maduro's recall or resignation. Thus far, the electoral strategy has yielded the most tangible results, producing a decisive electoral victory for the opposition in the December 2015 legislative election, which gave them control of the National Assembly. However, the protest/recall route has gained many adherents as chavismo has blocked institutional channels for legislative influence and the government's position has appeared increasingly precarious amid escalating economic uncertainty.

In light of the opposition's incongruous composition and often contradictory strategies, coordination has been difficult, leading to indecision, vague positions, and internal discord. To confront these challenges, the opposition has engaged in two major collaboration efforts since

Chávez's rise to power. The first, Coordinadora Democrática (CD – Democratic Coordinator), was founded in 2001 and brought together more than two dozen parties as well as representatives from private media, business, organized labor, dismissed oil professionals, and other anti-Chávez elements (García-Guadilla 2005; López Maya and Lander 2007). The group played a major role in efforts to remove Chávez including the 2002-2003 general strike and the 2004 recall (López Maya 2004). However, the CD lacked influence apart from its components, and its organizational structure, which gave more influence to individual leaders and non-party actors than to parties, was unable to bridge internal divisions (Cyr 2012; López Maya and Lander 2007). Following the failed recall referendum, the CD disbanded, and there was little coordination of opposition efforts until the Mesa de la Unidad (MUD) was formed in 2008. MUD, while still quite expansive, includes only parties and has established clearer procedures concerning internal decision-making (Cyr 2012, 109). The organization has been particularly successful at synchronizing electoral strategies among parties, including organizing primaries to select the opposition candidate for the 2012 presidential election and coordinating candidate selection for subnational offices and single-member district seats in the National Assembly. These efforts have helped prevent the opposition from dividing its votes among multiple candidates, but electoral coordination has not resolved other conflicts over ideology, policy, and strategies. As a result, the opposition has yet to offer a clear alternative to the chavista project, relying instead on vague campaigns that have thus far attracted support primarily as a result of frustration with the government's failure to address escalating inflation, scarcity, and insecurity as opposed to the opposition's own policy offerings (Cyr 2013; López Maya and Lander 2007).

Within the opposition, the two most important party organizations currently are Acción Democrática and Primero Justicia (PJ – Justice First). Although AD has been eviscerated

electorally and organizationally, it retains nationwide reach, which contrasts with PJ and UNT, whose support is concentrated around Caracas and in Zulia respectively (Cyr 2012; Sagarzazu 2011). Based on Sagarzazu's (2011, 132-3) calculations of party nationalization, AD is the opposition party with the broadest national range, and AD offers the opposition its most effective electoral machine, giving it an important role during campaigns and influence within MUD (Cyr 2012). This capacity has helped AD demand placement on MUD electoral lists and made its leader Henry Ramos Allup, President of the National Assembly.

However, AD has not engaged in much renewal since the party system collapsed; in fact, many of the same figures (including Ramos Allup) have controlled its apparatus since 2000. As a result, AD lacks leaders with national appeal and has been unable to put forth serious contenders for the opposition's presidential nomination (Cyr 2013). Ideologically, AD is located in much the same position as it was at the time of collapse, significantly right of PSUV but slightly left of the other major opposition party, Primero Justicia.<sup>20</sup> The party's base is aging, but AD retains strong ties to Venezuela's original peak union organization, Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV – Venezuelan Worker's Confederation), giving the party a modicum of influence among organized workers despite some government successes in strengthening alternative chavista unions (Iranzo and Richter 2006).

Primero Justicia is the most influential new opposition party, and while it has been more successful than most at attaining national reach and a clear identity, it lags behind AD in this regard (Alvarez 2007, 16; López Maya and Meléndez 2007; Sagarzazu 2011). PJ originated in 1992 as a civil society organization established by young, middle class professionals, many with

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<sup>20</sup> The small number of AmericasBarometer respondents identifying with AD in the most recent surveys makes using the ideological self-placement of partisans as a proxy for party ideology somewhat unreliable. However, grouping together all the AD supporters from 2008-2012 suggests that AD is right-of-center but left of PJ.

ties to COPEI (Pérez Baralt 2004; Sagarzazu 2011). The organization became a party in 2000 to compete in the state of Miranda, where its most important support base remains, and became a national party in 2002. PJ – the party of Henrique Capriles, the opposition’s presidential nominee in 2012 and 2013 – has been ascendant within the opposition. However, while the party has made recent organizational gains (Cyr 2012), it remains institutionally weak. Decision-making is centralized in the hands of a few leaders, and the party relies on the media as much as grassroots campaigning to connect to voters (López Maya and Meléndez 2007; Pérez Baralt 2004).

PJ falls on the right ideologically, a position fitting its origins in COPEI (Álvarez 2007; Cyr 2012). The party espouses values of justice, liberty and participation, but with little clear programmatic content. And while PJ leaders see themselves as promoting social justice, the party’s base, which is largely concentrated among the educated, urban, upper-middle class, suggests that this message carries little credibility among the poor (Pérez Baralt 2004). In the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey, respondents who identified with the PJ averaged 12 years of schooling, significantly higher than the Venezuelan average, and the modal PJ supporter fell into the highest quintile on the measure of household wealth. As with much of the opposition, PJ’s vision of society and politics can be defined in primarily negative terms – as opposition to chavismo that does not present a clear alternative policy model (Pérez Baralt 2004, 266).

Beyond AD and PJ, the opposition is composed of numerous smaller parties with mainly regional or personalist bases, with COPEI, UNT and Proyecto Venezuela among the most significant. COPEI leaders remain important actors within MUD even while the organization is significantly debilitated (Cyr 2012, 117-118). UNT was founded by former adeco Manuel Rosales to support his bid for governor of Zulia in 2000. Although Rosales was the opposition candidate for president in 2006 and other prominent opposition figures have since joined the

party, UNT remains a regional party with personalist tendencies (Sagarzazu 2011; UNT 2014). Proyecto Venezuela, the electoral vehicle established by former copeyano Henrique Salas Romer to support his 1998 presidential run, has lost significant ground since that time and is now largely confined almost to his home state of Carabobo.

### **Contestation in the Post-Collapse Party System**

As the preceding discussion suggests, the primary axis of competition in post-collapse Venezuela is the chavista-opposition divide (Cyr 2013; García-Guadilla 2005; Hawkins 2010). “The principal line of conflict in Venezuela is no longer the clientelist distribution of particularistic benefits, or programmatic debates over classic ideologies and broad policy packages, but the struggle between Chavismo and anti-Chavismo” (Hawkins 2010, 48). Nevertheless, while this division is easily summarized with reference to Chávez’s polarizing legacy, competition is not purely personalist in nature. There is substantive content to the intense conflict. However, the most important substantive divides are not the standard programmatic differences concerning economic and social policy or the role of the state. Of course, there are some differences between government and opposition on these issues – chavistas generally favor more state intervention, with certain elements even advocating a socialist economic transformation, while at least some within the opposition embrace neoliberalism. However, the opposition’s ideological diversity makes pinpointing positions on these issues difficult. Thus while chavistas are generally more toward the left and the opposition more toward the right, the extreme polarization in the Venezuelan party system cannot be attributed solely to differences concerning ordinary economic and social issues.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Comparing attitudes on these issues across opposition and MVR/PSUV identifiers provides evidence regarding this conclusion. The 2012 AmericasBarometer survey asked respondents five questions concerning various dimensions of state involvement in the economy and social policy. While there were significant differences between chavista (MVR/PSUV) and opposition (UNT, PJ, COPEI, AD, PV and Bandera Roja) identifiers concerning state

Rather the most salient facets of Venezuelan polarization pertain to fundamental contestation over rules of the game and over who has the power to control the state. Core questions on which the government and opposition have deep disagreements include 1) the importance of formal, procedural democracy versus substantive democratic values like social equality and 2) the priority of civil rights and liberties versus the tangible interests of the majority (Hawkins 2010). In survey data,<sup>22</sup> these sorts of issues consistently and significantly divide MVR/PSUV partisans and opposition supporters. Those who identify with one of the opposition parties are significantly more likely to support values traditionally associated with liberal, representative democracy including political tolerance, respect for civil rights and liberties, accepting the need for parties in democracy, and agreement that democracy is the best form of government. Alternatively, MVR/PSUV supporters were more willing to accept violations of liberal democratic norms and focused instead on the goal of assuring that substantive political outcomes benefit the people. For instance, chavistas were more supportive of direct rule by the people without elected representatives, more concerned about violations of the majority's interests, and more accepting of alternatives to electoral democracy. It is important to emphasize that these views are likely shaped by each side's relative position within the current political landscape. Chavismo holds the power, and its supporters are therefore less nervous about potential violations of democratic norms, which would likely impose few tangible costs and might be to their benefit. Conversely, the opposition does not control the levers of the state and is consequently interested in protecting democratic procedures to defend their rights as

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efforts to reduce inequality and state ownership of business/industry, there were no statistically significant differences concerning the state's role in providing for citizen's well-being, in job creation, or in healthcare.

<sup>22</sup> Data from 2012 AmericasBarometer.

regime opponents. Whether this alignment of democratic attitudes between chavistas and anti-chavistas would persist if the opposition came to control the state is difficult to judge.

Data from the DALP expert survey provides additional evidence concerning the significance of this divide between opposition support for democratic *procedures* and chavismo's concern with substantive *outcomes*. Experts were asked to place the parties on a 10-point scale ranging from "instrumental valuing of democracy for its substantive achievements" (1) to "valuing democracy independent of its substantive achievements" (10). MVR's placement averaged 2.33 on this scale, while UNT averaged 8.33 and PJ 7.0. The gap between government and opposition on this issue was much larger than for items focused on the traditional left-right divide such as the state's role in the economy, pro-poor social spending, and left-right ideology.

Another important division concerns the parties' social bases, with chavistas drawing support from those excluded by the traditional party system and opposition parties protecting previously incorporated groups now marginalized under chavismo. The preceding discussion describing each of the major parties points to the significance of this cleavage. MVR/PSUV and other pro-Chávez parties draw support primarily from the poor, less educated and otherwise marginalized, while the opposition speaks for groups successfully incorporated in the old system including middle class professionals, organized labor, and the traditional political elite. Experts in the DALP survey also identified the significance of this class-based divide in Venezuelan politics. When asked to list the most important socio-political divisions in the country, responses frequently identified this cleavage pitting the marginalized against the powerful. In fact, there were more mentions of a divide between classes or between the people and oligarchy than mentions of the chavista/anti-chavista divide. These features of partisan divisions, which do not center around specific policy tools but instead focus on divergent priorities concerning who

should control the levers of the state and how that power should be exercised, help explain how such strange bedfellows can coexist within each side of the government/opposition divide.

### **Party System Deinstitutionalization**

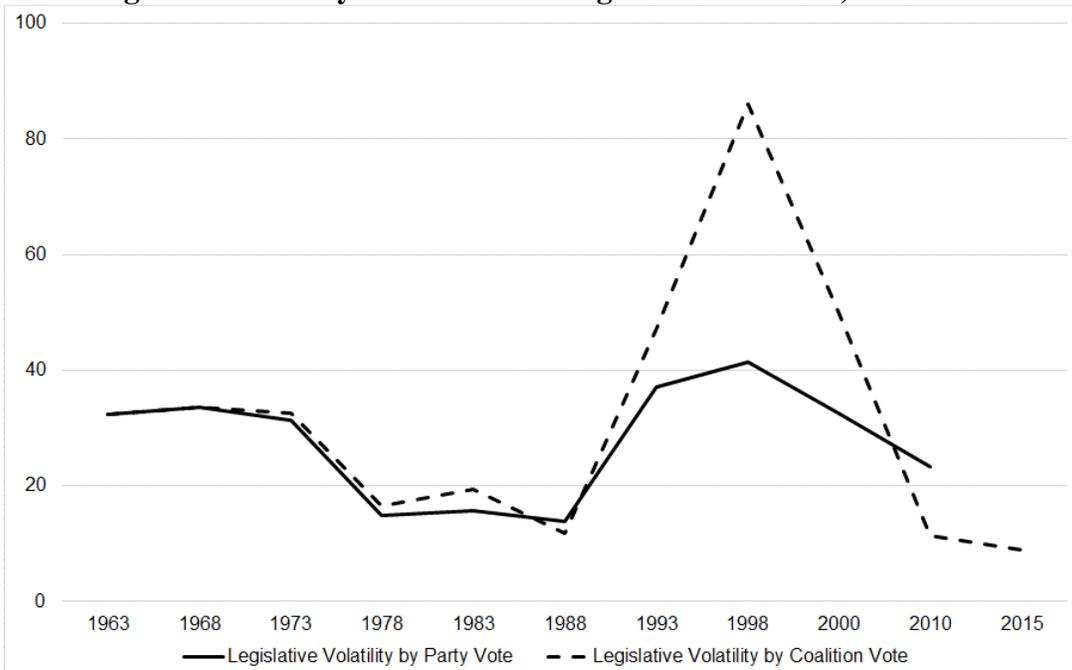
With the collapse of the traditional party system, party politics in Venezuela experienced extensive deinstitutionalization. While the new system has made uneven gains, institutionalization remains well-below the levels attained at the height of the old system. Here I analyze institutionalization in the current system first by discussing stability in patterns of interparty competition and then by assessing three dimensions of party systems posited in chapter 1 of this volume to promote institutionalization: the legitimacy of parties, the presence of stable partisan ties to society, and the importance of party organizations. Patterns of inter-coalition competition have stabilized somewhat in recent years despite continued interparty fluidity, but the factors needed to promote stability over the long-term are less evident. While both government and opposition have begun to develop stable social roots, perceptions regarding the legitimacy of parties and elections are highly polarized, and party organizations often lack significance.

#### **Inter-coalition Stability despite Interparty Fluidity**

With collapse of the old party system, decades of stability in interparty competition evaporated. Volatility in presidential and legislative elections reached levels unmatched throughout Venezuela's democratic history. But while interparty volatility remains high, stability has returned to the patterns of competition between the system's two major coalitions.

To explore temporal variation in stability, I calculated electoral volatility to assess the extent to which vote shares shift between parties from one election to the next. Typically, scholars use volatility to assess changes in *party* vote shares. However, in the Venezuelan party

**Figure 2. Volatility in Venezuelan Legislative Elections, 1963-2015**



Source: Author calculations based on election returns.  
 Note: 2005 legislative election results are excluded because the opposition chose to boycott those elections, leaving the electoral playing field for pro-Chavez forces to dominate. As a result, election returns from that election do not reflect the nature of competition within the party system. If the 2005 data were included the volatility during the first decade of the 21st century would be much higher.  
 For 2015, it is not possible to calculate legislative volatility by party because votes accrued to coalitions only, not individual parties.

**Figure 3. Volatility in Venezuelan Presidential Elections, 1963-2013**



Source: Author calculations based on election returns.

system, where competition is polarized between coalitions rather than individual parties, *coalition* volatility is an important indicator. Figures 2 and 3 present volatility for party and coalition vote in presidential and legislative elections. Solid lines present party-based volatility; dashed lines depict inter-coalition changes.

The most obvious pattern is the dramatic increase in all four volatility measures between 1988 and 1998. After decades of moderate and declining volatility, instability escalated swiftly with the collapse of the party system, and all four indicators reach their highest level in 1998. In the aftermath of collapse as new competitors vied for electoral space, volatility remained elevated through the mid-2000s. Moreover, if we consider individual party volatility, instability has persisted through the 2013 presidential elections and 2010 legislative (2010) elections, which are the last legislative contests for which individual party vote shares are available. These high levels of fluctuation in individual party performance suggests that a party's vote share in the last election offers little insight into its ability to secure support in the next. Considering interparty competition alone suggests that Venezuelan party system dynamics have remained unstable since collapse.

However, if we analyze competition between major coalitions, a different pattern emerges. Preceding and immediately succeeding collapse, coalition volatility largely mimics party volatility. However, the two indicators diverge after the 2000 elections as coalition-based volatility declines more steadily and more rapidly than the party-based measures. Inter-coalition volatility dropped to 11.5 and then 8.9 in the 2010 and 2015 legislative contests, fell below 8 in the 2012 presidential election, and declined to less than 5 in the 2013 election to select Chávez's replacement after his death. These volatility scores are *lower* than those experienced during the peak years of the institutionalized 2.5-party system and are reminiscent of stability more often

found in European systems. Much of the gap between party and coalition volatility is driven by instability within the opposition coalition. While MVR and its successor PSUV consistently receive the bulk of chavista votes, opposition votes have vacillated dramatically between coalition members.

These volatility data align with the general contours of current party competition discussed above. There is remarkable stability around the government-opposition divide, but substantial fluidity between individual parties within each coalition. The opposition camp is especially volatile with votes shifts depending on the party affiliations of the coalition's current presidential nominee and of other influential spokespeople as well as internal negotiations concerning nominations for key subnational contests. Overall, patterns of interparty dynamics create uncertainty within the opposition and to a lesser extent within chavismo, which suggests that deinstitutionalization still plagues the *party* system. However, the stability that increasingly characterizes inter-coalition competition suggests a certain routinization that supersedes the party system and instead centers on the alternative visions offered by chavistas and opposition.

### **Polarization in the Legitimacy of Parties and Elections**

Beginning in the 1990s, Venezuelan parties and elections have suffered a crisis of legitimacy. Although Venezuelans on average maintain some of the most positive attitudes regarding parties and elections in Latin America,<sup>23</sup> this general pattern masks considerable polarization in assessments of parties and elections, which divide government and opposition at the mass and elite levels.

Among the public, government supporters view parties as effective agents of representation and maintain high levels of trust in the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE –

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<sup>23</sup> Source: 2012 AmericasBarometer. Venezuelans possess high levels of trust in parties and elections, relatively positive assessments of party-based representation, and support for the idea that parties are important for democracy.

National Election Council). In fact, Venezuelans who identified as chavistas in the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey held more favorable assessments of their national election authority than any other group of partisans in all of Latin America, with scores averaging 5.69 on a 7-point scale measuring institutional trust. On the other hand, opposition identifiers were significantly more skeptical of the quality of representation provided by parties and more likely to hold the CNE in low esteem. In regional perspective, Venezuelan opposition supporters had some of the lowest trust in their electoral authority, averaging 3.15 on the 7-point scale. In most countries, pro-incumbent partisans are more trusting of the election authority than opposition supporters, but Venezuela's government-opposition divide is remarkable – wider than any other country in the region. For most countries, this gap is less than 1 point on the 7-point scale. In Venezuela, the gap is 2.54; the only other country that surpasses a 2-point gap is Nicaragua, where contestation over rules of the game is also acute. While this legitimacy gap may have closed somewhat following the 2015 legislative elections, which gave the opposition a resounding victory with 65 percent of seats in the National Assembly, lack of trust continues to color opposition partisan's views of the CNE.

Conversely, chavistas are much *less* positive than opposition partisans when asked about diffuse support for parties as important democratic institutions. MVR/PSUV identifiers are significantly more likely than opposition supporters to agree that democracy could function without parties. Thus, chavistas are pleased with the functioning of elections and parties, while opposition supporters are abstractly convinced that parties are significant for the maintenance of democracy. These contrasting beliefs reveal deep polarization about the legitimacy of parties and elections, which coincides with a core divide between the two camps concerning the value and meaning of democracy as discussed above.

At the elite level, politicians often behave in ways that suggest low esteem for parties, eschewing the constraints parties impose and largely neglecting the development of effective party organizations. Consequently, many parties serve primarily electoral functions, and as I discuss further below, few of the non-traditional parties have territorial reach, routinized intraparty procedures, or autonomy from the whims of individual leaders or social groups, which Riedl (2008) expects of institutionalized party organizations. Additionally, when rifts between co-partisans emerge, individual politicians are quick to form a new party, calculating that existing party organizations offer them few advantages. As a result, the political landscape is littered with parties like PODEMOS, Alianza Bravo Pueblo, and Voluntad Popular that formed when individuals or small groups broke with existing parties.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, competition does not revolve around parties, but occurs either at the level of individual politicians (e.g. Maduro vs. Capriles) or interparty coalitions (chavismo vs. opposition).

Additionally, elite views about election legitimacy are bifurcated like those of the mass public. Chavistas point to much progress, particularly since 2005, in professionalizing Venezuelan electoral administration, including introducing electronic voting, automating vote counting, extensive auditing of vote tallies, and updating voter rolls (Carter Center 2013; Von Bergen 2013). The CNE has at times invited international observers to lend legitimacy and transparency to the election process, although robust international observation has not been permitted since 2007 (McCoy 2015).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, in 2015 it oversaw legislative elections that permitted a decisive victory for the opposition, bolstering claims about electoral transparency.

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<sup>24</sup> PODEMOS formed from a split in MAS. Alianza Bravo Pueblo was created by former adecos, and Voluntad Popular split from Primero Justicia.

<sup>25</sup> International observers were regularly invited between 1998 and 2006. After a brief period in which the government declined to invite observers, some were permitted to return in 2012, 2013 and 2015 although the scope and seriousness of these efforts were limited.

Although the substantive effects of this victory have been essentially neutralized by chavismo's efforts to use other institutions under its control (e.g. Supreme Court, Presidency, etc.) to circumvent the legislature and limit its policymaking capacity.

Despite efforts to strengthen the professionalism and credibility of elections, loyal chavistas dominate the CNE, press coverage of opposition campaigns is restricted, and the government leverages public resources to support its candidates. As a result, opposition leaders are often skeptical, frequently questioning the fairness of electoral processes, protesting election outcomes, and occasionally refusing to participate altogether. For instance, the opposition contested the 2004 recall referendum results as fraudulent (Kornblith 2005) and boycotted the 2005 legislative elections amidst claims the process was not free or fair (Alvarez 2007, 16).<sup>26</sup> More recently, the opposition raised accusations of fraud and unsuccessfully pressured the CNE to nullify the first post-Chávez election results in which Nicolás Maduro narrowly defeated Henrique Capriles (Carter Center 2013), and serious reservations about the CNE's ability to adjudicate opposition efforts to invoke a recall referendum against Maduro persist. Many of these concerns have been fueled by the government's well-documented efforts to retaliate against those who signed recall petitions in 2004 (Hawkins 2010; Hsieh et al. 2009) and by extensive use of state resources to support incumbent party candidates, control the press, and disqualify leading opposition politicians (Carter Center 2013).

In sum, the opposition is more acceptant of parties as inherently valuable, but points to multiple instances of electoral irregularities and an unfair playing field for competition. Chavistas have more favorable views of how parties and elections function, extolling the quality

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<sup>26</sup> In both instances, international observers' declined to support the opposition's claims.

of electoral administration and their willingness in 2015 to accept defeat. Overall, views of parties and elections are polarized, and the party system therefore lacks a firm base of legitimacy

### **Stable Roots in Society**

Like legitimacy, societal rootedness has the potential to facilitate party system stability. Often, measures of parties' ties to society use party age as a proxy (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Riedl 2008). With the exception of the surviving traditional parties, most Venezuelan parties are less than 20 years old. However, the reality of party system collapse prohibits the Venezuelan system from demonstrating rootedness through age-based heuristics because collapse means that parties with considerable longevity lose their positions and are supplanted by new competitors.

While younger parties may face challenges in establishing strong ties to society, building such ties is not impossible, particularly in intensely polarized, politicized contexts like contemporary Venezuela. Despite the constraints new parties face in establishing roots and the time required to test the durability of these bonds, many Venezuelan parties have begun to develop strong ties to specific social groups and/or regions. Moreover, the social divide between the chavistas and opposition is one of the most salient features of contemporary political contestation, with the traditionally marginalized and formerly incorporated sectors facing off in repeated skirmishes for control of the state. Therefore, while the relatively young Venezuelan party system still lacks the deeply established ties between parties and major social organizations that characterized the pre-collapse system, both the chavistas and the opposition have clear constituencies that create some continuity in their social bases.

As discussed above, the most distinctive element of the chavista constituency is strong support from those previously excluded from the traditional party system. The poor and those outside the formal economy have provided a critical base for chavismo, facilitating Chávez's

initial rise to power, guaranteeing reliable and vocal support when the movement has faced attacks, and many continuing to back the party despite Chávez's death and poor management of increasingly severe economic and social challenges. The poor, the less educated and the racially marginalized are much more likely to support chavismo than the opposition. Moreover, the PSUV performs particularly well in poor, rural areas and marginalized urban barrios. This social base is a defining element of the movement. Moreover, the party enjoys high levels of partisan identification and widespread activist networks, which are valuable but largely focused on electoral mobilization.

However, the ties between the party and its base are not deeply ingrained through organizational linkages nor are they the product of routinized, carefully constructed interactions. Despite some efforts to establish more institutionalized ties through social organizations, such as developing a chavista labor movement (Ellner 2013; Iranzo and Richter 2006), links to the chavista base tend to be direct and personalist, typically occurring outside traditional organizational intermediaries (Handlin and Collier 2011). Most attempts by the party to organize the base have been illusory efforts spearheaded by presidential initiatives, like the Bolivarian circles and community councils, which rely on government funding and do not often survive when presidential attention shifts toward other concerns (Hawkins 2010; López Maya 2011; McGuire 2014; Pereira Almaso 2004). Such state-sponsored efforts at grassroots mobilization are unlikely to serve as an organizational base for chavismo absent public funds acquired through control of the presidency (McGuire 2014). The movement's most vibrant social organizations, including local cooperatives, community radio stations, and other grassroots organizations, have largely operated outside or perhaps alongside the party. Occasionally, the party and these social groups have coordinated their efforts, but they frequently work toward different, albeit not

inherently incompatible, goals (Fernandes 2010). Grassroots movements offer networks and organizations upon which the party might build enduring group-based ties, but this potential remains largely unrealized. Thus, while grassroots networks and deeply held chavista identities for some point to an underlying strength for chavismo, the party has not yet emerged as pivotal for amalgamating these interests or amplifying their influence.

On the opposition side, key supporters include those traditionally incorporated by the old system, such as organized labor, middle class professionals, and business interests. Within the coalition, individual parties have niches that are sectorally or geographically defined. For instance, Primero Justicia appeals to middle class professionals, while AD maintains strong ties to CTV, the original centralized labor organization. The varied party options within the opposition allows typically divergent interests to coexist as they coalesce around the goal of dethroning chavismo. Of course, this diversity also obscures the ideological positions of opposition candidates and undermines their ability to construct coherent and clear programmatic appeals. Moreover, most of the opposition parties are even weaker than the PSUV in terms of maintaining established organizational ties that structure their constituency linkages in routinized ways. AD stands as a partial exception to this pattern, having sustained institutionalized incorporation strategies that facilitate preservation of the party's ties to core supporters (Cyr 2012). Thus, clear social bases and identities define and divide the supporters of pro- and anti-chavista parties, but organizational efforts to institutionalize these ties have been limited.

### **Uneven Institutionalization of Party Organizations**

In Venezuela, the institutionalization of party organizations is uneven across parties and across various indicators of organizational strength, including degree of party structure, routinization of internal procedures, territorial reach, and lack of personalism and factionalism.

In recent years, PSUV leadership has invested in organizational development by inaugurating offices throughout the country, implementing an extensive set of party statutes, holding three party congresses since 2010, and establishing internal commissions to promote a variety of tasks such as communications, ideological formation, and social movement relations (PSUV 2010, 2014a, 2014b). The party has also sought to mobilize party activists through civilian oversight committees and get-out-the-vote efforts like “uno por diez” (PSUV 2012). These efforts set PSUV apart from new opposition parties, which have made more limited organizational investments.

However, PSUV’s formal institutions are often without weight in party operations and decisions. Within both PSUV and new opposition parties, decision-making procedures lack routinization, and party rules are frequently victims of internal power struggles. For instance, candidate selection processes are unpredictable, and nominations often occur centrally without consulting party members or subnational leaders (Lugo-Galicia 2013). The opposition used primaries to identify Capriles as its 2012 presidential nominee and to specify some candidates for the 2013 regional and 2015 legislative contests; PSUV employed primaries for the 2015 legislative election and a combination of primaries and centralized selection to nominate candidates for the 2010 parliamentary and 2008 subnational elections (Lugo 2010a, 2010b; Lugo-Galicia 2008; Vásquez y Rivera 2013). However, such consultation has been haphazard and inconsistent, and the parties grant considerable autonomy to their central executive committees and feature highly centralized decision-making (López Maya and Meléndez 2007). As a result, they tend to react impulsively to the pressures of idiosyncratic events, rather than making carefully deliberated decisions. Chavista initiatives have frequently been launched and then abandoned or replaced, and individual leaders across the political spectrum often announce

major shifts in strategy or policy without consulting their party organizations (Hawkins 2010). These patterns permit flexibility (a feature the traditional parties sorely lacked), but also subject the parties to the whims of powerful individuals, create uncertainty for voters, activists and party leaders, and may undermine democratic stability. AD offers a partial contrast to the new parties in terms of organizational routinization. But while AD retains many of its established guidelines governing internal decision-making, the same small set of leaders has controlled the party since the early 2000s, and many formal rules have been jettisoned in favor of autonomy for these leaders.

Given these low levels of routinization, it is not surprising that personalism is a major feature of Venezuela's new parties (Molina 2004, 39-40). Before his death, Chávez exercised the ultimate authority within PSUV, and his wishes continue to carry important weight within the party (Hawkins 2010; Morgan 2011). As Margarita López Maya (2011, 236) has noted, "the sustained mobilization of popular sectors and their direct relationship with the president, without need for intermediaries, weakened still more the already weak role of parties in the political regime." While the post-Chávez PSUV is not dominated by a single personality, individual leaders like President Maduro and Diosdado Cabello, who heads the PSUV apparatus and the party's contingent in the National Assembly, continue to act independently of the organization and at times in contradiction with each other. Personalism likewise characterizes the opposition, with UNT, PV and many smaller parties closely tied to one or a handful of influential individuals (López Maya and Meléndez 2011). AD and to a lesser extent COPEI and PJ maintain some organizational patterns and identities that manifest more, but still limited, independence from powerful personalities (Pérez Baralt 2004).

Factionalism and internal divisions also characterize Venezuelan parties, a feature largely consistent with the traditional parties' intraparty dynamics (Coppedge 1994). As detailed above, PSUV suffers from several axes of internal conflict between militarists and civilians and ideological moderates and hardliners. Likewise, the opposition features numerous divisions both between and within its component parties. Individual opposition leaders have frequently broken with their parties either to form new organizations or to join other parties in the coalition (e.g. Leopoldo López's departure from PJ, first to join UNT and then to form Voluntad Popular).

Finally, many Venezuelan parties are highly regionalized. The new opposition parties, in particular, lack territorial reach, with UNT centered in Zulia, PV in Carabobo, and COPEI in Táchira. Even PJ, which has had more success in establishing national appeal, has struggled to extend its reach beyond urban centers in the middle of the country (Cyr 2013; Sagarzazu 2011). MUD's candidate selection strategies reflect this pattern, with nominees for each state or locality typically hailing from regionally influential parties. Among the opposition, AD offers the most effective nationwide apparatus (Cyr 2012), yet its reach and viability as a national party has been significantly enervated since the system's collapse. Among the major competitors, PSUV has the greatest national appeal, but it has relied heavily on regional leaders to build support and still lacks the subnational organizational penetration that characterized the traditional parties in their heyday (Sagarzazu 2011). In general then, party organizations in the post-collapse system are plagued by factionalism and are less routinized, more personalistic, and more spatially confined than the traditional parties were at their peaks. Among the new parties, PSUV has made the most organizational investments, but the impact of these efforts on actual party operations remains largely unrealized.

In sum, party system institutionalization as well as the dimensions that promote it are uneven in Venezuela across indicators and across parties. Despite continued volatility at the party level, particularly within the opposition, inter-coalition stability is high and compares favorably to neighboring countries with more established party systems like Chile and Mexico. Parties across the spectrum have stable roots in society, chavistas and anti-chavistas alike manifest strong identities, and the PSUV enjoys especially broad support, eclipsing that of many other parties discussed in this volume, including the PRI and PAN in Mexico and the PT in Brazil. But the organizational bases of these social ties remain weak (opposition) or uninstitutionalized (PSUV). Patterns of party and election legitimacy vary in predictable ways between the two coalitions – the opposition supports the preservation of their democratic rights but not electoral institutions or partisan representation under the current regime, while chavistas evaluate the system’s electoral and representational achievements positively but are less enthusiastic about liberal democratic institutions in the abstract. The institutionalization of party organizations is also uneven. New opposition parties are nearly uniform in their weakness on all dimensions of party organizational strength. PSUV and to a lesser extent AD manifest greater territorial reach and more structured organizations, despite suffering from lack of routinization as well as personalism and factionalism.

Overall, the chavistas have taken more steps that might lay the foundation for an enduring party organization. However, the ability of the party to persist without control of the state remains uncertain, and the movement’s indifference regarding liberal democratic norms and its willingness to violate democratic procedures raise questions about the kind of party organization an institutionalized PSUV might be. Its extensive machinations to remain in power in the face of plummeting oil revenues and declining popularity, suggest that elements within

chavismo likewise question the party's ability survive outside of power and reveal authoritarian tendencies within the movement. Opposition parties, on the other hand, have focused on unseating Chávez and his successors, without much attention to building strong organizations or deeply-rooted social ties that go beyond rejection of chavismo. Distinctions between the two camps may be partially explained by chavista use of the state apparatus for partisan ends, which has privileged PSUV's institutionalization and limited on the opposition. But the frequently reactionary posture of the opposition, which positions itself primarily as the anti-chavista option as opposed to pro-something else, also contributes to asymmetry in institutionalization.

### **The Future of Venezuelan Party Politics**

The collapse of the traditional party system in Venezuela has had dramatic consequences for the nature and structure of partisan competition and politics more broadly. While previously marginalized groups have found new voice and programmatic options are now available across the ideological spectrum, collapse has also aggravated social and political conflict, heightened personalism, disrupted the predictability and routinization of party organizations, and undermined liberal democratic institutions. As chavismo has encountered escalating inflation, serious shortages, and depleted resources due to evaporating oil revenues, mismanagement and corruption, the movement's seemingly unassailable position appears vulnerable and increasingly overt power grabs that go beyond the bounds of democratic practice tarnish its image.

Moving forward, the party system is likely to develop along one of three trajectories. First, the system could maintain the status quo with two polarized coalitions that command loyalty from core supporters alongside a substantial group of unaligned voters. The coalitions would remain internally fragmented between competing factions and personalities, and party organizations across the board would remain primarily electoral machines with PSUV

manifesting greater organizational complexity but not much internal routinization. Second, PSUV could deepen its degree of institutionalization, by establishing stronger organizational ties to grassroots chavista movements, strengthening the routinization of party decision-making procedures, and limiting the influence of personalities and factions within the party, while maintaining an ambivalent or hostile stance toward liberal democratic rules of the game. If this process develops while the opposition remains marginalized, organizationally weak and/or effectively repressed by the government, a hegemonic party system would solidify and likely promote development of an institutionalized authoritarian regime. Finally, mounting frustration with the government's poor performance on economic and security issues could drive unaligned voters and weak chavista identifiers to back opposition efforts to force chavismo out of power,<sup>27</sup> eventually elevating an opposition candidate to the presidency. This would prove a considerable test for chavismo. While PSUV largely weathered the challenged posed by Chávez's death, its continued reliance on the government apparatus and public resources to motivate and mobilize supporters creates vulnerabilities for the party. The party's organizational weakness would intensify if it were removed from power, particularly if an opposition government opted not for a conciliatory tone but a scorched earth approach toward the dethroned chavistas. While this third option would require both effective opposition strategies and continued mistakes by the government, the prospect serves as a significant motivating factor for the chavistas to consolidate power and strengthen their organization in ways that resemble the second path outlined above.

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<sup>27</sup> This could occur via recall referendum, the ordinary election schedule, or force.

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