

Venezuela: changes and continuities in post-Chavez era

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the changes and continuities of the Venezuelan political process in the last three decades. Venezuela has experienced economic and political challenges, which have implied deep transformations in the nature of its political process. Since Hugo Chávez reached power in 1998, the political system has gradually transformed from an electoral democracy into a competitive authoritarianism. President Chávez's charisma, the weakness of democratic institutions, and the rise of oil prices allowed him to implant a kind of regime that used elections to legitimize power while undermining civil and political rights, coopting check and balance institutions, and increasing state control over economic and social life. Nevertheless, the concurrence of his death and the end of high oil prices produced a legitimacy crisis in the regime, which has had an impact on electoral preferences and government support.

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the changes and continuities in the Venezuelan political process since the mid-nineties. It is worth noting that Venezuela was one of the most stable democracies in South America during the second half of the 20th Century, but since the late eighties, it started to show signs of fatigue and deinstitutionalization. In February of 1989, President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1978; 1989-1993) announced economic reforms, several riots and looting, known as "El Caracazo", shook the country. Barely 25 days had passed since Mr. Pérez won the presidency with 52.9% of support. This was the prelude to a period of instability in which two failed coup d'état occurred, an impeachment removed President Pérez from Office, the party system collapsed and the country faced a financial and economic crisis. After a brief transition government, headed by Ramón J. Velásquez, and the second presidency of Rafael Caldera, this period ended with the election of the former coup d'état leader, Hugo Chávez, as President of Venezuela (1998-2013).

The reasons behind the collapse are twofold. On one hand, the Venezuelan economy had experienced a period of turbulence after the fall of oil prices since the late seventies. For an economy that depended heavily on oil revenues, the crash of crude oil prices made a negative shock on economic performance and the State's capacity to deliver public goods. In this context, Venezuelan foreign debt was unbearable for the

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government and, on February 18th, 1983, the currency was devaluated for the first time in decades.

On the other hand, the political system was not able to adapt itself to the rapid sociodemographic and economic modernization of the second half of the 20th Century. The two main political parties, social democrat Acción Democrática (AD) and the Social Christian (COPEI), had monopolized political and social institutions turning Venezuela democracy into a partyarchy that undermined the quality of democracy and generated instability in the political system itself (Coppedge, 1997). As a consequence, people started to show their disengagement with parties and the political system as a whole. Rivas Leone (2008, p. XVII) argues that, during the nineties, Venezuelans embraced anti-political attitudes toward the system, institutions, and democracy, embracing the offer of an outsider to carry out a political revolution.

The election of Hugo Chávez as president in December of 1998 is a critical juncture of this process. Since that date, political institutions, the economy, civil society, state bureaucracy and the Armed Forces were transformed. The conjunction of President Chávez's charisma, the weakness of democratic institutions (Levine & Molina, 2012), as well as the rise of oil prices allowed him to implant a kind of regime that used elections to legitimize power, while undermining civil and political rights, coopting checks and balance institutions, and increasing state control over economic and social life. Hence, Venezuela took a path from an electoral democracy to a competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

However, Chavez's illness and death were a new critical juncture in the Venezuelan political process. When Chavez died in 2013, Vice President Nicolás Maduro seized power, but his lack of charisma and the deep economic crisis undermined his legitimacy. This crisis affected the daily life of Venezuelans. Food shortages, lack of medicines, malfunctioning of public services and rampant criminality reduced popular support of Mr. Maduro and his government.

As a result, the government has faced several political and social protests. Also, in December 2015, the ruling party lost control of National Assembly in parliamentary elections. President Maduro has responded to these challenges through a combination of selective repression and imprisonment of opposition leaders and activists, limitation of electoral participation, and the use of the judicial branch to reduce the powers of Parliament in favor of the Executive branch. Four years after Mr. Chávez's death, Venezuela is no longer a competitive authoritarianism, since becoming an authoritarian regime.

In this chapter, we aim to analyze the changes in Venezuelan political process during the last three decades. We attempt to identify the political, institutional and social aspects that contributed to the transformation of the political system in Venezuela; and try to address the transition, first from an electoral democracy toward a competitive authoritarianism, and finally toward the consolidation of an authoritarian regime.

Inside Venezuela: Understanding the economic and social context

To fully comprehend the Venezuelan situation, one must take a look at its particular economic and social dynamics, one in which dependency on oil, clientelism, poverty, and revolution make for an explosive and highly dysfunctional cocktail.

Petroleum is and has been the starting point of any economic discussion regarding Venezuela since the dawn of the 20th Century. Some scholars have described the nation as a Petro-State (Karl, 1997), that is, one in which revenues from net oil exports make up at least 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Petro-States are usually unstable, exhibit weak political institutions, and are clientelistic, inefficient, prone to violence and noncommittal to development. The numbers back up the categorization: In 2014, oil accounted for 96% of revenue from exports and 30% of the GDP (Hidalgo & Puente, 2016).

Oil exploitation had a pivotal role in the consolidation of the modern Venezuelan State since 1910, and starting in 1927 it would become the country's main export. By 1929, Venezuela was the world's first oil exporter (Hidalgo & Puente, 2016). This paved the way for the economic, political and social modernization of Venezuela.

By the 1970s, oil represented more than 90% of all revenue from exports, 20% of the GDP and more than 65% of tax revenue. These numbers, evidencing a high dependency on oil, would only increase in the following decades (Hidalgo & Puente, 2016). Thus, oil conditioned economic growth: Between the 1950s and 1973, it contributed to an annual growth of between 6% and 7% of the GDP. However, starting in 1979 growth stopped and for the following two decades the country was subject to the fluctuations of the international oil market, affecting the economy as well as the functioning of the State, the quality of life of its citizens, and the perceived satisfaction with democracy.

Venezuela had its biggest oil boom, both in revenue and in duration, in the years of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, translating into approximately 880,000 million dollars between 1999 and 2015, and averaging a price of \$45 per barrel in the same timeframe (Hidalgo & Puente, 2016). Where in the past rent was used to promote the modernization of Venezuela, as well as its democracy, this time around it was used as a way to implement a socialist model. Arenas (2010) describes petroleum as the material base of the populist sociopolitical project that is in place in Venezuela. Others go one step further, and say that oil was key in the political objective of establishing a new political hegemony favoring Hugo Chávez (Bautista Urbaneja, 2013), or that the radical goal of the *Chavista* project was to substitute a free market economy for a socialist, state-controlled, centralized economy (Maza Zavala, 2009). The difference is clear: where the previous democratic experience focused on strengthening institutional arrangements and the normalization of periodic democratic and peaceful transitions of power, under Chávez the focus turned to assure power for one leader and his followers (Bautista Urbaneja, 2013).

Some consequences of this near-absolute dependency on oil have been: currency appreciation, imports boom (which reached a historical \$59.339 million in 2012, four

times the average of the last 30 years), higher discretionary handling of rent by the Executive and the fall of non-oil exports (Hidalgo & Puente, 2016). Presidential control over the oil industry has been described as unprecedented, even when compared to the times of the military dictatorships of the early 20th Century (Maza Zavala, 2009). This discretionary control is evidenced by the simultaneous existence of three national budgets: one, the official budget, approved by the National Assembly until 2016, when the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and the President boycotted the now opposition-controlled Parliament, assuming legislative powers. This budget constantly understated oil prices in order to give more weight to what we can call the second budget, which consists of additional credits approved per case; and a third one, comprised of the surplus of international reserves and petrodollars administered by State-run *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) (Maza Zavala, 2009).

Venezuela claims the highest proven crude reserves in the world, with 299.95 million barrels that make up 24.9% of the total (Maza Zavala, 2009). However, starting in 2014, oil prices saw a sharp decline. This, along with the weakening of PDVSA due to clientelism, politicization and poor management, has contributed to the economic collapse in Venezuela, also signed by the highest inflation rate in the world and critical levels of food and medicine scarcity.

Table 1. Oil and non-oil exports as % of the total. 1999-2014

Year	Oil	Non-oil
1999	79.83%	20.17%
2000	83.13%	16.87%
2001	81.54%	18.46%
2002	80.40%	19.60%
2003	80.90%	19.10%
2004	82.87%	17.13%
2005	86.41%	13.59%
2006	88.40%	11.60%
2007	90.77%	9.23%
2008	93.68%	6.32%
2009	94.54%	5.46%
2010	94.66%	5.34%
2011	95.20%	4.80%
2012	96.2%	3.8%
2013	96.2%	3.7%
2014	96.4%	3.6%

Source: Banco Central de Venezuela (BCV), with calculations by Hidalgo & Puente (2016).

The government tried to face the economic setbacks by establishing currency and price controls. Because of this, the Venezuelan economy is growing to be increasingly more dysfunctional (Balza, 2016). With the end of the latest oil boom, the superficial advances in the reduction of poverty were also reverted; deepening a process that had already begun to show signs between 2009 and 2012 (España, 2015).

One of the major consequences of the current economic model in Venezuela has been the strengthening of what some call “subterranean economies”. These are illegal activities, including black market operations, which have real effects on legal economic endeavors. Price controls, as well as currency controls, started in 2003. Subsidized gasoline, for instance, remained at a fixed price, even as oil prices increased between 2003 and 2012. This allowed for contraband of gasoline, food and other products across the border to Colombia to become a highly lucrative activity, with organized criminal groups forming as a result.

The impact of these subterranean economies can be clearly seen in the fact that, since 2013, the commonly accepted reference for the exchange rate isn't the official, government-sanctioned one, but rather a “parallel” rate, calculated by multiplying the price of one Colombian Peso in currency exchange offices in bordering Cúcuta by the price of one US Dollar in Pesos in Colombia (España, 2015). This has generated important distortions in the economy that favor illegal activity, often carried out with the participation of government officials. The poor are, undoubtedly, the most affected by the resulting rise in inflation.

Starting in 2007, the Chávez administration started a strong policy of expropriations of businesses and lands, more akin in reality to a confiscation. Today, production in these businesses and lands has notably diminished, aggravating the economic crisis among the Venezuelan people.

In all, 21st Century Socialism has been all but revolutionary in changing the economic dynamic in Venezuela. Far from straying away from rentism, the two *Chavista* administrations have only deepened it. As a political project, the Bolivarian Revolution is unable to sustain itself without high oil prices. This is conducive to collapse.

The economy in Venezuela is currently in shambles. Instead of diversifying the economy, Venezuela has only deepened its dependence on oil in the last twenty years. Instead of strengthening production, Venezuela is now more dependent on imports than ever before, given the distortions of the market product of the economic policy. There is serious technological lag, especially in the manufacturing industry, which generates a loss of productivity and competitiveness. Lastly, the prospect of Venezuela's economic future is still relying on oil, as the main bet is in the Orinoco oil belt, currently exploited by different multinational oil companies.

The collapse of oil prices and the mismanagement of the economy have deteriorated the work market and reverted any superficial advances that the oil boom had on the reduction of poverty. In 1998, when Hugo Chávez was first elected, poverty stood at 45%, according to the National Statistics Institute (INE, in Spanish). By 2014, it rose to

48%. Currently, the National Survey on Life Conditions (ENCOVI, in Spanish), led by the three most renowned universities in Venezuela, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Universidad Simón Bolívar, and Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, shows that poverty has shot up to 81.8% of homes (UCV, USB, & UCAB, 2016).

The government’s main offer, its “Misiones”, social programs for the poor, are in a dire state, and 70.8% of the population says that it doesn’t benefit from any of them (UCV et al., 2016). Even more, 59% of Misiones beneficiaries aren’t poor, and just 19% qualify as extremely poor. Politics plays a big part in this, as 46.6% of those who claim not to be beneficiaries’ state the main reason is exclusion. After three continuous years on the rise, temporary and recent poverty is turning into structural poverty for millions of Venezuelans.

Table 2. Structural poverty 2016

2016	Non-poor	Poor
Non poor	Non Poor 16.4%	Inertial Poverty 3.18%
Poor	Recent Poverty 49.38%	Chronic Poverty 31.09%

Source: National Survey on Life Conditions (UCV et al., 2016).

Food shortages have been prevalent, with 93.3% of Venezuelans considering that their incomes are not sufficient to purchase food. 74.3% claim an “uncontrolled” weight loss in the last year, averaging 8.7 kilos. Those in extreme poverty lost 9 kilos in the last year due to this and 86.3% eat just twice a day or less. So there is not only scarcity but also increasing inequity in the quality and quantity of nutrition (Idem).

One of the main problems in the Venezuelan social sphere in the last two decades has been crime and personal safety. According to the ENCOVI, 94% of the population considers that violence has risen in the past year. The homicide rate is 91.8%, reaching an astonishingly high 28,479 murders in 2016. Young people are the main victims, accounting for 21,643 of these deaths, 76% of the total. 68% does not report the crime to the authorities, as part of the vicious cycle that shows impunity at 96%. Furthermore, 57% qualify police efforts as negative or very negative, and this is also true for the district attorney’s office (56), judges (56%), and prisons (66%).

80% of Venezuelans say they fear being robbed or attacked in public transportation. 66% fear being robbed in the streets in play daylight and 60% fear to be robbed or attacked in their own homes. This has, naturally, led citizens to modify their day-to-day routines: 69% of the population has limited the places they go to for fun or recreation due to fear and 47% has even limited their attendance to places of work and study. Once again, the poor performance of police forces and the criminal justice system comes into play: 72% of Venezuelans state that their main protection comes from their neighbors, not the police.

These numbers stretch across all social spheres. In education, there are over one million children and adolescents not attending school and in the 18-24 age bracket, and only 1

of 5 of the poorest quintile has access to education. The same goes for health, where Venezuela shows the worst vulnerability since the start of the 20th Century, with a tendency to worsen (UCV et al., 2016).

Venezuelans haven't taken this passively. According to the Venezuelan Observatory on Social Conflict (OVCS, in Spanish) in the first semester of 2016, there were, on average, 19 protests per day. That number has surely increased since. 90% of these respond to what we've called social issues (food shortages, public services, education, crime, etc.) (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, 2016). Lootings and looting attempts have also begun to increase as the crisis deepens. The social and economic crisis in Venezuela has led to the erosion of popular support for Mr. Maduro and his political party, and the resulting loss of competitiveness has signaled the turn toward authoritarianism.

3. The Collapse of the Venezuelan Party System

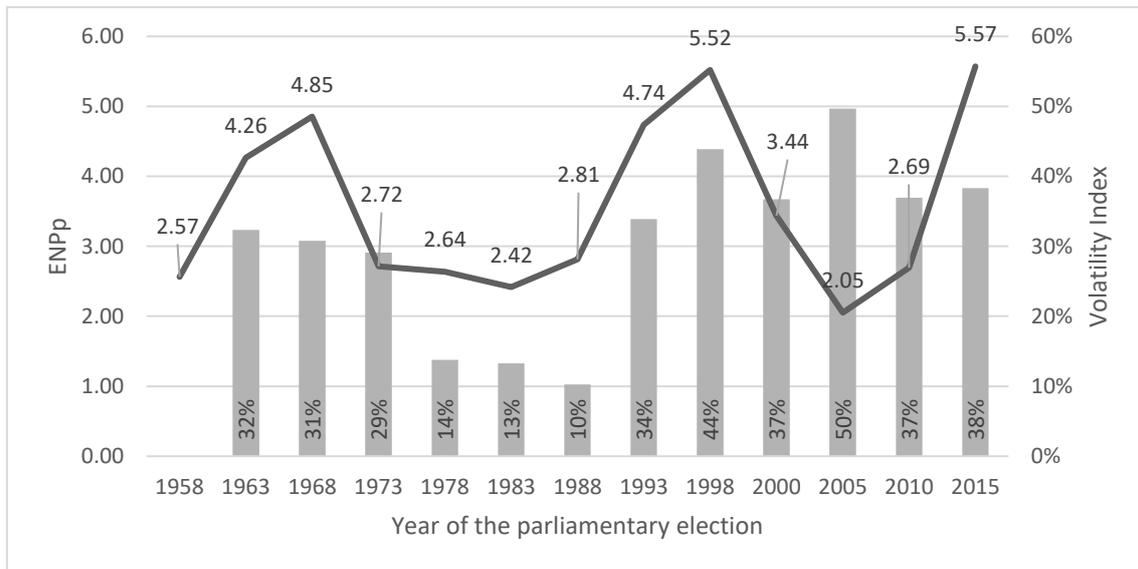
The Venezuelan party system suffered a collapse during the nineties. According to Dietz and Myers (2007) a party system collapses *"when large numbers of voters desert the system-sustaining parties in a short period; the weakened system-sustaining parties cannot regain support or reconstruct the intrasystemic relationships that structured the party system before the collapse began, and new political parties emerge and a different configuration of inter-party competition takes shape"*.

Venezuela is a paradigmatic case. The period between 1958 and 1988 is regarded as the institutionalization and consolidation of the bipartisan system (Molina, 2004). During this period, the party system showed stability, the main political parties maintained their support among the electorate, people identified themselves with the existing political parties, and there was no radical polarization between political actors (Rivas Leone, 2006, 2008). Chart 1 shows the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP)³, which allows us to know the number of parties that have an important proportion of seats within the Legislative power (Ruiz-Rodríguez & Otero Felipe, 2013, p. 123). Furthermore, Chart 1 shows the Aggregated Parliamentary Volatility Index⁴ that measures the total changes in the percentage of seats between two elections (Ruiz-Rodríguez & Otero Felipe, 2013, p. 143). Both indicators show that between 1973 and 1988 the party system institutionalized, displaying relatively low levels volatility and an ENPP that shows two and a half relevant parties.

³ ENPP was calculated using the numbers of seats obtained by each party in the lower house of Congress during 1958-1998, and in the unicameral National Assembly between 2000 and 2015. We use Effective Number of Party index developed by Laakso and Taagepera and improved by Taagepera y Shugart (Ruiz-Rodríguez & Otero Felipe, 2013).

⁴ We use Aggregate Volatility Index developed by Pedersen that measures the total changes in the party system as a whole In this case we use the changes in the proportion of seats between two elections (Ruiz-Rodríguez & Otero Felipe, 2013, pp. 143–147).

Chart 1. Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties and Parliamentary Volatility in Venezuela 1958-2015



Source: Authors with data from the National Electoral Council (CNE, in Spanish)

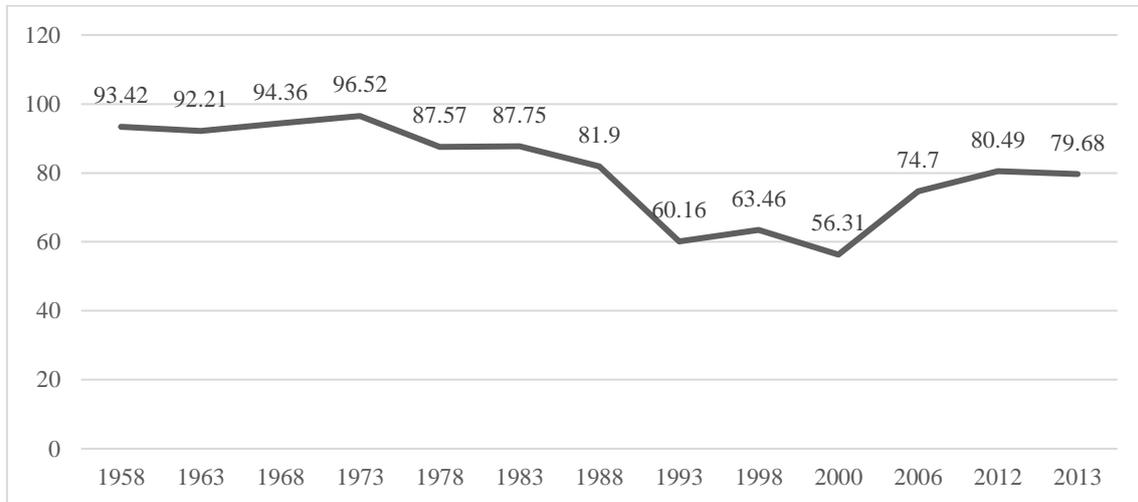
As shown in Chart 1, the turning point in the Venezuelan party system was 1993. While between 1973 and 1988 the party system had in average 2.65 of ENPP, and the volatility was under 15%, in 1993 ENPP soared to 4.74 and aggregate volatility raised 34%. By 1998 ENPP reached 5.52, while electoral volatility climbed to its highest point: 44%. That is to say, in 1998 Congress was highly fragmented, and compared with the previous election 44% of seats switched parties.

The reasons behind this collapse are mainly three: First, the decrease in voting turnout. As shown in Chart 2, between 1958 and 1988 the turnout average in the presidential election was 90%. By 1993 it fell to 60%, and reached its lowest point in 2000 with 56% of participation of registered voters; second, the change in party preferences by the electorate. Between 1973 and 1978, AD and COPEI concentrated 88% of the people's preferences, by 1993 it dropped to 45%; being the first time since that a candidate of these two parties did not seize the presidency. Finally, the fragmentation of the party system, which implied the loss of centrality of these two political parties in the legislative process, and opened the opportunity to newcomers to initiate innovations within the political system.

Rivas Leone (2008) states that this change of political behavior was a consequence of the loss of the legitimacy of political parties and elites, a change in Venezuelan socio-political imaginary, a perception of widespread corruption and the rise of new leadership resulting from the process of decentralization initiated in the eighties. These are some of the reasons why Mr. Chavez rose to power in the 1998 election. While some people changed their preferences toward an anti-system outsider, others decided not to participate in any election between 1993 and 2005, a period in which the old party

system collapsed completely, traditional parties almost disappeared, and Mr. Chávez became the only reference within the political system.

Chart 2. Presidential Election Turnout Venezuela 1958-2013



Source: Authors with from CNE

In 2000, the ENPP decreased to 3.44, but volatility still was high. In this election, Mr. Chavez's party, Movimiento Quinta República (MVR), consolidated as the main political actor in the new National Assembly, whereas AD and COPEI became secondary actors in Venezuelan politics. In 2005 the opposition boycotted the parliamentary elections, which explains the rise of parliamentary volatility to its maximum, while the ENPP dropped to 2.05.

The return of parties to the electoral arena in the presidential election of 2006 allowed them to take control over the opposition movement. In 2008, the foundation of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), which translates to Democratic Unity Roundtable, was the only rational option for those who opposed Chávez and his party. The creation of the MUD was a result of two mutually reinforcing elements. On the one hand, the charismatic leadership of Mr. Chávez, that transformed every election into a plebiscite about himself (Álvarez, 2016). On the other hand, an electoral system that generates incentives among political parties to run in alliance, either to challenge Chávez in a relative majority vote system or to compete against PSUV in parliamentary election ruled by a mixed member majoritarian system. Hence, the inability of the parties to challenge individually Chavez, along with the institutional design encouraged the formation of the MUD (Álvarez, 2016).

In the same vein, Chávez tried to unify his electoral coalition by founding the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in which MVR and some of his allies merged to build a new party. But, as Alvarez (2016) points out, the PSUV is a second best in the desire of Chavez to unified all parties that support him in a unique party. Organizations such as Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), Patria para

Todos (PPT), Por la Democracia Social (PODEMOS), and Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (MEP), among others, refused to dissolve in order to be part of PSUV.

The real changes in the party system started when political parties presented their candidates in alliance to the National Assembly election of 2010. Thus, the parliamentary volatility remained high –37%– due to the changes of seats from ruling party toward the opposition. Likewise, the ENPp rose to 2.69. By 2015, the changes of preferences of the people and the coalition system allowed the opposition to gain the majority of the seats, which implied that the volatility remained in 37%, while the ENPp rose to 5.57.

However, this data should be interpreted carefully, because the opposition parties, as well as government parties, ran in coalitions, which means they act as blocks of parties instead as individual organizations. To grasp this situation, we calculated the ENPp by coalitions in 2010 and 2015, in the first case the Effective Number of Parties was 1.97 being PSUV and its allies (Gran Polo Patriótico, GPP) the most important coalition in Parliament. Similarly, in 2015 the ENPp by coalitions was 1.79, but in this case, the most important coalition is MUD.

Beyond the changes in the numeric structure of party systems in Venezuela, this transformation can be observed in the parties that survived or emerged during the collapse of the party system. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of seats by parties in the legislative branch between 1993 and 2015. As we can see, the collapse of the party system meant an important change in the relevant actors of the political system. While old parties almost disappeared, except for AD in 2015, new organizations emerged in the legislative arena. Some of them were ephemeral actors, such as Proyecto Venezuela (PRVZL), La Causa Radical (LCR), Convergencia (CONV) or Por la Democracia Social (PODEMOS). The most important party in this era is the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), founded as Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) in 1997, which had used the control over State’s resources to finance its activities. It is worth noting that in the Constitution of 1999 the public financing of political organizations is banned, contrary to what was established in the Constitution of 1961. So that, political parties survive due to the control they can take over national and subnational level offices, being the PSUV the party that has controlled more offices in this period. Finally, some parties had emerged but it is necessary to wait whether they are ephemeral or not, the most important of them are Movimiento Primero Justicia (MPJ), Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), and Voluntad Popular (VP).

Table 3. Number and percentage of seats y parties in the lower house of Congress (1998-1998) and in the National Assembly (2000-2015).

Party	1993		1998		2000		2005		2010		2015	
	Nº of Seats	%	Nº of Seats	%	Nº of Seats	%	Nº of Seats	%	Nº of Seats	%	Nº of Seats	%
AD (b)	55	27.09%	62	29.95%	30	18.18%	0	0.00%	16	9.70%	25	14.97%
COPEI (b)	53	26.11%	28	13.53%	8	4.85%	0	0.00%	6	3.64%	0	0.00%
LCR (b)	40	19.70%	6	2.90%	3	1.82%	0	0.00%	3	1.82%	4	2.40%

CONV (b)	26	12.81%	4	1.93%	4	2.42%	0	0.00%	1	0.61%	0	0.00%
MAS	24	11.82%	17	8.21%	21	12.73%	0	0.00%	1	0.61%	0	0.00%
MEP (a)	1	0.49%	1	0.48%	0	0.00%	11	6.59%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
MVR/PSUV (a)	0	0.00%	46	22.22%	80	48.48%	114	68.26%	97	58.79%	52	31.14%
PRVZL (b)	0	0.00%	20	9.66%	7	4.24%	0	0.00%	3	1.82%	2	1.20%
PPT (a)	0	0.00%	7	3.38%	1	0.61%	11	6.59%	2	1.21%	0	0.00%
PCV (a)	0	0.00%	1	0.48%	0	0.00%	8	4.79%	1	0.61%	2	1.20%
MPJ(b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	5	3.03%	0	0.00%	6	3.64%	33	19.76%
UNT(b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3	1.82%	0	0.00%	17	10.30%	18	10.78%
ABP (b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.61%	0	0.00%	1	0.61%	1	0.60%
PODEMOS (a)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	15	8.98%	4	2.42%	0	0.00%
Independents (b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	6	3.64%	3	1.80%
VP(b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.61%	14	8.38%
MPV (b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	4	2.40%
CC (b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	1.20%
AP (b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	1.20%
GE(b)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.60%
VR (a)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.60%
Otros	4	1.97%	15	7.25%	2	1.21%	8	4.79%	0	0.00%	3	1.80%
Total	203	100.00%	207	100.00%	165	100.00%	167	100.00%	165	100.00%	167	100.00%

^a Parties that belonged to the government coalition, Great Patriotic Pole, in 2015.

^b Parties that belonged to the opposition coalition, MUD, in 2015.

Source: Authors with from CNE

Besides the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Venezuelan party system, the format of the party system allows us to observe the mutations in the Executive-Legislative relationship from the mid-nineties until 2017, and its impact on the functioning of democracy in the country. In the next section, we review the institutional design of the Venezuelan political system, and how it contributed to the decisions and activities of political actors and in the autocratization process.

4. Institutional Design

4.1. Presidentialism and Electoral Rules

In Venezuela, as is the rest of Latin America, presidentialism has been the dominant institutional design. The Venezuelan Constitution states that the President and Congress are elected directly by the people for fixed terms, not contingent to mutual confidence, and the president has control over cabinet nomination (Shugart & Carey, 1992). Although this institutional design was already in the Constitution of 1961, some changes were introduced in the Constitution promoted by Chávez in 1999.

First, in the new Constitution, the President is elected for a six-year term when the previous one stated a five-year term for the chief of the Executive. Second, while in the Constitution of 1961 immediate reelection was forbidden and the president had to wait

at least two five-year terms to run for office again, in the Constitution of 1999 it was allowed for only one term. However, this restriction was removed from the fundamental law through a constitutional amendment recall promoted by Chávez in 2009, in order to allow indefinite reelection of all elected offices. Additionally, in both constitutions, the President is elected based on the relative majority of votes, and it does not contemplate a ballotage.

Regarding Parliament, the bicameral Congress was replaced by a unicameral National Assembly, eliminating a veto player of the system. Also, this new institutional arrangement reduced the number of representatives from 207 in 1998 to 165. In both constitutions, representatives are elected for a five-year term and can be reelected for two additional terms. But, as it was pointed out previously, reelection restrictions were eliminated in 2009.

Concerning the electoral rules regulating the election of the National Assembly, the Venezuelan Constitution states that the electoral system is guided by proportional representation. Thereby, the distribution of the seats should reflect, as much as possible, the distribution of voters' preferences. According to the data gathered by Bormann and Golder (2013), Venezuela had a pure proportional system from 1963 until 1988, when the system was transformed into a mixed one, in which a number of seats are elected by closed lists and the rest are elected by single-member district (SMD) (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). Briceño (2013) states that this reform decreased the number of proportional seats by half, due to the adoption of the mixed system. The reason behind this change was to give citizens the opportunity to vote for representatives by name, substituting the closed and blocked party list used until that 1988, and thus improving accountability of Parliament representatives.

However, the electoral system stated in the Electoral Law⁵ approved in 2009 does not respect proportionality. This Electoral Law transformed the mixed member proportional system into a mixed member majoritarian one, or parallel mixed system, in which "the allocation of the list seats takes no account of the disproportionalities created by the single-member tier" (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005, p. 573). That is to say "a system that tends to overrepresentation in an intentional way, that cancels the principle established in the [Constitution of 1999] in its article 63" (Briceño, 2013, p. 140). This electoral system was approved by the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and its allies, during the 2005-2010 legislature. At that moment, Chavez's party dominated the National Assembly, due to aforementioned boycott that the opposition made to the legislative elections in 2005.

In Venezuela, 67%⁶ of seats are elected in SMD, while the 33% of the seats were allocated by closed list. However, even when there are 24 districts in which representatives are elected by closed lists, in 21 of them the district magnitude is two

⁵ Electoral Law refers specifically to the Organic Law of Electoral Processes approved in 2009.

⁶ In 2010, 113 out of 167 seats were elected in this kind of district. In 2015, 110 out of 165 seats were elected using these rules.

and in the others, the magnitude is three. According to Alarcón et al. (2016, p. 69), “as has often been the case in the two-seat districts, the major alliances of government and opposition gain one seat each, while in the three-seat districts, the winning alliance wins two seats, and the loser, one”.

As a result, there is no proportional representation, and the only way that parties have to ensure some seats in Parliament is building electoral coalitions. In the same vein, several authors point out that Electoral Law goes against proportionality because it eliminates the link between the voting list and the nominal vote (Briceño, 2013; Hidalgo, 2011b, 2013; Molina, 2014; Monaldi, Obuchi, & Guerra, 2010; Trak, 2016). Additionally, the Venezuelan electoral system shows malapportionment problems. Thus, in some districts with a small population, the percentage of seats to be distributed is higher than in those states with more inhabitants, allowing the first to be overrepresented and the latter underrepresented (Briceño, 2013; Hidalgo, 2013; Monaldi et al., 2010).

4.2. Presidential Powers

According to Shugart and Carey (1992)⁷, presidential powers are the capability of the President to print his own signature in the political process, that is to say, President’s control over the political agenda. Mainwaring and Shugart (2002) state that these powers come from two sources: First, constitutional powers, which state the formal attributions that the President has so that his preferences are taken into account in the political decision-making process. Second, the partisan power, which means control over the political parties that support him or her, and the control of these supporting parties over a majority of seats in parliament. These two types of power are interactive, and determine the influence of the President over the public policy (Mainwaring & Shugart, 2002, p. 49).

4.2.1 Constitutional Powers

Shugart and Carey (1992) state that constitutional power can be measured in two different ways. On one hand, legislative powers, that is to say, the legislative influence of the President over the lawmaking process. On the other hand, non-legislative powers, which refers to the “presidential authority over the cabinet and the power to dissolve the assembly and call new elections” (Shugart & Carey, 1992, p. 152). Mainwaring and Shugart (2002) indicate that legislative powers can be classified as proactive or reactive, being the first ones those that allow the president to change the status quo (legislative initiative and decree power), while the second are those that allow the president to block changes in this status quo (veto power) (Chasquetti, 2008). Within this theoretical framework, the UNPD (2004, p. 92) compared the formal presidential powers in Latin

⁷ See also: Mainwaring and Shugart (2002), Payne et al. (2007)

America⁸, in the Venezuelan non-legislative powers of the President are classified as very low, while legislative powers were classified as medium low.

The Constitution of 1999 does not consider that the president has exclusiveness in the initiative for introducing legislation. Also, if the President requires an enabling law in order to have decree power in any matter, he or she needs three-fifths of all parliamentary members. Finally, if the President has an objection about a part or all the law approved in the parliament, the National Assembly can decide whether to take them into account or dismiss them by approving the legal text without amendment, by a majority of representatives in the chamber. As a result, President proactive and reactive powers to maintain or change the status quo are limited by Parliament. That is to say, the constitutional powers of the President depend heavily upon the support that he or she can assure inside the National Assembly.

4.2.2 Partisan Powers

Partisan powers are an important feature of Venezuelan institutional arrangement. Mainwaring and Shugart (2002) point out that presidentialism works differently depending on the number of parties in the system. When the party system is highly fragmented, is more difficult for the President to address his political agenda. Conversely, when the party system is not fragmented and the party of the President has a majority in parliament, is easier for him or her to approve initiatives. Chasquetti (2008) states that coalitions are also important for the functioning of presidentialism if the positions of parties are centrist and no maximalist is more likely for government party and opposition to reach an agreement, but if the positions of parties are extreme and polarized a gridlock is almost for sure. In some extreme cases, it is possible that parliament attempt to remove the President through an impeachment process (Pérez-Liñán, 2009).

Since the late eighties, the Venezuelan political process had experienced different scenarios in relation to Legislative-Executive relations. Table 2 shows the Presidential and Legislative elections since 1988; also it delivers the percentage of votes obtained by the President's party, and the size of a legislative contingent of each President as well.

Table 4. President Election and Legislative Contingent in Venezuela 1988-2015

President Election	President	% President's Party Votes	Party in Government	Legislative Election	Legislative Contingent	Type of Government	President's Party Control
1988	Carlos Andrés Pérez	52.76%	AD	1988	46.0%	Majority Party	Low
1993	Rafael Caldera	17.03%	CONVERGENCIA	1993	26.3%	Minority Coalition	High

⁸ In this report UNPD (2004, p. 92) uses as indicator legislatives and no-legislative formal powers of President, in which their measures

1998	Hugo Chávez	40.17%	MVR	1998	34.3%	Minority Coalition	High
2000	Hugo Chávez	48.11%	MVR	2000	61.2%	Majority Coalition	High
2006	Hugo Chávez	41.10%	MVR	2005	100.0%	Majority Party	High
2012	Hugo Chávez	42.94%	PSUV	2010	59.4%	Majority Coalition	High
2013	Nicolás Maduro	41.32%	PSUV	2015	32.9%	Minority Coalition	High

Source: Authors elaboration

4.2.3 Pérez: a president with an undisciplined majority

In 1988, Carlos Andrés Pérez was the last president of Acción Democrática (AD). He won that election with 52.76% of votes and obtained a share of seats large enough to control Parliament. However, Pérez was not in control of his own party, according to Coppedge (1997). Pérez belonged to an out faction of AD, his nomination as presidential candidate in 1988 was supported by the grassroots of the party and opposed by the heads of his own organization and incumbent president Jaime Lusinchi (1983-1988). When Pérez became president in 1989, he appointed some technocrats in key cabinet positions and promoted a process of decentralization, as well as neoliberal reforms, finding opposition inside Acción Democrática, dominated at the time by the orthodox faction (Pérez-Liñán, 2009, p. 46). After four years in office, in which the aforementioned “Caracazo” occurred in 1989 and two failed coup d’état in 1992, the Attorney General began an impeachment against the President accusing him of corruption in 1993. At the end of August of 1993, President Pérez was removed from office by a majority of representatives in the lower house and upper house. As Pérez-Liñán (2009) states, this outcome resolved the presidential crisis without a democratic break. Still, it did not resolve the systemic crisis of Venezuelan political system, which continued until the first two decades of 21st Century.

4.2.4 Caldera: a President with a minority coalition

In 1993, former President and founder of COPEI, Rafael Caldera (1968-1973; 1994-1998), won the election as a result of a coalition with the left of the center parties. Caldera was defeated internally for the presidential nomination of 1993 and, because of that, he abandoned COPEI and founded a personalist party named Convergencia (CONV), becoming a maverick within the political system.

That election was highly competitive, and Caldera seized power with only 29.35% of votes, in the election with the lowest level of participation – 60.16%– since 1958. His party obtained only 17% of votes, while the remaining 12% came from the party Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and others 15 small political organizations. Hidalgo (2002) points out that “for the first time a candidate won without the support of a real machinery, and without belonging to one of the two big parties” (Hidalgo, 2002, p. 100). As a consequence, Convergencia obtained only 26 representatives and, MAS 24, and all

together they gained 24% of the lower house. During this term, Venezuela faced a financial crisis and constant turmoil due to the economic situation, high inflation and lack of response from the State towards citizens' demands. Hence, the President had to govern with a minority coalition in Congress and constant street riots. That is why President Caldera had to negotiate with Acción Democrática support for his policies. Sontag and Maingón (2001) argue that President Caldera had to sacrifice the political reforms in order to achieve political and economic stability, and the partyarchy within political institutions such as the electoral management body or the Judiciary remained.

4.2.5 Chávez: a President who imposed his majority

In this scenario, Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) emerges as a political outsider. After being pardoned and released by President Caldera in 1994, Chávez walked the country with an anti-system message, while arranging meetings with left of the center intellectuals and politicians. In 1995, he called for abstention of governor elections. However, in 1996 he was convinced by leftist parties to abandon the subversive path and embrace the electoral arena (Marcano & Barrera Tyszka, 2006, p. 163). Chávez founded Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) in 1997 and set up a coalition with MAS, some of the small parties that endorsed Caldera in 1993, and new ones like Patria para Todos (PPT). When Chávez announced his candidacy in 1997, traditional political parties did not perceive him as a threat. However, as the campaign progressed, he rapidly found popular support across the country, and political parties started to see him as the contender to defeat. By the end of the campaign, AD and COPEI withdrew their support of their nominees and endorsed the governor of Carabobo state, Henrique Salas Römer, from a regional party named Proyecto Venezuela (PRVZL) as presidential candidate.

Chávez (1999-2000) won the 1998 election with 52.57% of votes, while Salas Römer obtained only 37.39% of support; participation remained near to the one experienced in 1993. MVR obtained 40% and MAS 9% of popular vote. In the lower house, MVR obtained 46 representatives, MAS had 17 and PPT gained 7, equivalent to 22.22%, 8.21%, and 3.38% each. That means that Chávez, as President Caldera did, had to deal with a minority coalition in Congress. The ruling party and its allies controlled about 35% of the seats. According to Sontag and Maingón (2001), this situation made it difficult to reach agreements when appointing presidents of the chambers or advancing the legislative initiatives coming from the new President. One of the first conflicts between Congress and President Chávez was the approval of decree powers for the President in 1999. Hidalgo (2011a) indicates that Chávez obtained powers to rule by decree in economic and financial matters by threatening Congress with decreeing an economic emergency, but also mobilizing supporters around Parliament, and accusing the opposition of blocking the tools he needed to govern.

During his political campaign, Chávez proposed a referendum for a National Constituent Assembly (ANC), in order to write a new Constitution. At the beginning of 1999, parties that supported Chávez (MVR, MAS, PPT) and those in the opposition (AD, COPEI, PVZLA)

debated in the Congress whether it was necessary to reform the Constitution of 1961 in order to recall the ANC, or if the President had the authority to do it without any constitutional reform. At the end, the judiciary took a decision in favor of Chávez, allowing him to call a referendum to ask people whether they wanted a constituent process or not (Maingón, Pérez, & Sonntag, 2001). Corrales and Pendfold (2012) argue that President Chávez took advantage of his popularity and the people's anti-party sentiments in order to intimidate other branches of the political system, and force them to make decisions that increased his powers.

In February, Chávez drew an executive order to organize the referendum on April 25th of 1999. He won it with 87% of the valid votes, but participation was less than 40% of registered voters. After that, the government designed the electoral system to elect the members of the ANC, which was integrated by 131 members (Maingón et al., 2001). This election was held on July 25th, and the turnout was 46.3%. The government coalition obtained 94.6% of the seats, opposition parties 3.1%, and independents candidates 2.3%. Corrales and Pendfold (2012) state that Chávez won almost all the seats inside the ANC with only 53% of valid votes. On August 25th, the ANC suspended Congress and dissolved in March 28th of 2000. The ANC recall worked to resolve the gridlock in the parliament, and the Supreme Court preferred not to challenge Chávez instead of maintaining the existing institutions.

As Hidalgo (2011a) points out, Chávez used the ANC to approve the budget and avoiding control from Congress. In the same vein, Pérez-Liñán (2009) argues that the President employed the ANC, in which he had a solid majority, as a tool to remove a Congress wherein his party was in minority. This conflict was resolved after the approval of the new Constitution in December of 1999 and the call for general elections in June of 2000, in which the people had to elect the President, National Assembly Members, Governors, Mayors, and members of regional and local legislative bodies. In that election, Chávez (2000-2006) was elected for a second time as President with 56.52% of valid votes, with a turnout of 56.31%. In the new National Assembly, MVR won 44.3% of the seats, and with its allies controlled 61% of the new parliament. As showed in Table 4, this was the last concurrent election, since the term of the president last six years, while National Assembly has a five-year term.

In the Constitution of 1999, decree powers have to be approved by the three-fifths of parliament members, that is to say, 99 of seats. As shown in Table 5, in the year 2000 President Chávez requested an enabling law to rule by decree for a year and a half, he signed 49 laws, which produced unrest among the private sector, middle classes and political opposition. During this period instability was the norm, old unions and businessmen guilds that confronted Chávez in the streets led the opposition. Due to their discredit among citizens, traditional political parties almost disappeared from the public sphere, and were in the tail of this movement against the "Bolivarian Revolution". This governability crisis produced massive protests and a failed coup d'état on April 11th of 2002, and a two-month oil industry and general strike at the end of the same year.

During these crises, some of his allies left the coalition and the government lost the three-fifths required to approve a new enabling law.

Table 5. Enabling laws to rule by decree 1999-2005

Period	President	Year of approval	Duration	No. of Decrees
1999-2000	Chávez	1999	Six months	53
2000-2006	Chávez	2000	Twelve months	49
2007-2012	Chávez	2007	Eighteen months	59
2007-2012	Chávez	2010	Eighteen months	54
2013-2019	Maduro	2013	Twelve months	56
2013-2019	Maduro	2015	Six months	20
		Total	72 months	291

Source: the authors and Transparencia Venezuela (2015)

A dialogue process led by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Cesar Gaviria, resolved the crisis. This dialogue ended in a recall process to revoke Chávez from office in August 2004. After two years of irregularities in the call of the referendum against the President (Kornblith, 2007), Chávez managed to win it by obtaining 60% of votes against the proposal to revoke him, and 40% in favor to leave office. Turnout increased to 70%. The opposition gathered in a coalition named Coordinadora Democrática (Democratic Coordinator) alleged fraud but did not provide any evidence.

During this legislative period, Chavez had to deal with a simple majority. He was able to pass some of his political initiatives, but those decisions that required a special majority in the parliament ended in a gridlock. For instance, the appointment of new members National Electoral Council in 2003 needed a two-third majority in Parliament, which implied a negotiation between ruling parties and the opposition. However, it was not possible to reach an agreement, so the Constitutional Chamber of the now Supreme Tribunal of Justice appointed the new members of the electoral management body that were dominated by people close to the President's party.

In 2005, the ruling party and its allies took control over all seats in the National Assembly. The opposition decided not to participate in that election, arguing that there were not enough guarantees of vote secrecy. By boycotting this parliamentary election, the opposition allowed Chávez to deploy all his legislative powers. As Table 5 reflects, during this period, the President was granted two enabling laws to rule by decree, one in 2007 other in 2010. But also, the ruling party appointed several members of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, members of the National Electoral Council, the Attorney General, the Ombudsman and the General Comptroller, most of them sympathizers or even members of the party of the president. Thus, during this period, Chávez seized control of all check and balance institutions, reduced the opposition to its minimal expression, and due to the increase in oil revenues, was able to fund social policies and clientelistic networks that granted electoral support.

During this legislative period, President Chávez ran for a third term (2007-2012) in 2006. He competed against a unitary candidate nominated by political opposition. Manuel Rosales, governor of the state of Zulia, had the support of all political parties, it was the first time that opposition made a real electoral alliance in order to challenge the ruling party. The result was the victory of Chávez with 65% of valid votes, while Rosales obtained 35% of support, and the turnout was 74%. Alvarez (2014) points out that 2006 can be considered as the moment of party's comeback. After seven years of an opposition dominated by an anti-party coalition, political parties reemerge as central political actors within the political system.

Due to this clear victory, President Chávez tried to change the Constitution through a reform, in which he expected to increase the presidential term from six to seven years and remove the restriction of indefinite reelection, as well as transform the political system from a republic to a communal state. On December 2nd of 2007, he was defeated for the first time in an election. His proposal was rejected by 51% of voters, in a referendum in which 60% of registered voters cast their votes. However, as was mentioned previously, he managed to introduce an amendment to the Constitution in 2009 that removed the limitation of terms in all elected offices.

By 2010, opposition parties united around a new electoral coalition named Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), which translates to Democratic Unity Roundtable. It was founded on January 23th, 2008, and its purpose was to challenge the ruling party in the regional and local elections of that year, and parliamentary elections in 2010. After five years outside the National Assembly, the opposition returned to Parliament with an election held on September 26th of 2010. It is worth noting that these elections were called by the CNE three months before the end of the term. The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and its allies obtained 48.2% of votes and 60% of the seats. Meanwhile, opposition parties gained 47.17% of votes and 39.39% of the seats. Then-dissident PPT tried to compete as a third way outside polarization, but only obtained 3.12% of valid votes, and 1.12% of seats. Knowing this result three months before the end of the 2005-2010 legislative period, PSUV used this time to pass several laws that constrained political rights, as well as increased Executive control over the economy, and the foundation of the communal state. As mentioned earlier, at the end of this period the National Assembly dominated by the PSUV approved an enabling law that allowed Mr. Chávez to rule by decree from December 17th of 2010 until July of 2012, six months before the end of the 2006-2012 presidential term.

When President Chávez announced his illness in June of 2011, the political debate changed dramatically. First, Chávez's health was treated as State secret, generating uncertainty about his political future, and rumors filled the public debate. Second, the presidential and state governor elections had to be held in December of 2012, and there were doubts about the capability of the president to have a good performance during the campaign. Besides, the opposition held open primary elections, in which the governor of the state of Miranda, Henrique Capriles Radonski, won the nomination to

challenge the incumbent Chávez. Cyr (2013) points out that the illness of Chávez, the youth of Capriles, and bad economic performance of Venezuelan economy after the fall of oil prices between 2008 and 2010 combined to offer the appearance that the opposition had the possibility of winning the election.

In this context, the National Electoral Council (CNE) split the elections into two separated processes. The presidential election was announced on October 7th of 2012, while governors' elections were called for December 16th of the same year. Some critics of CNE stated that the early call of presidential election served the purpose of offering President Chávez the opportunity to campaign, in a party that had him as unique leader without any mechanisms to choose a substitute.

In any case, oil prices returned to maximums in 2010, allowing Chávez to promote social policies and reinforce his clientelistic bonds. The most important policy was the "Misión Vivienda", a housing policy in which the government offered free houses for poor people. Even when these houses were not delivered immediately, the government created a list of persons registered with the promise to have one after the election. In the end, Chávez won the presidential election against Capriles 55% to 45%, and the turnout reached 80% of registered voters.

Nevertheless, Chávez was not able to take office for a fourth term. On December 8th of 2012, he announced that he would travel to Cuba for a second surgery, and asked his followers that in the event he was not able to return to assume office, that they cast their vote for the recently appointed Vice President, Nicolás Maduro. Chávez did not come back from that surgery, and Mr. Maduro assumed the presidency, temporarily, in January of 2013, and the transition from a competitive authoritarianism toward and hegemonic regime started.

Corrales (2015) argues that during Chavez's era (1999-2012), his government deployed *autocratic legalism*, which means "the use, abuse, and non-use (...) of the law in service of the executive branch"(Corrales, 2015, p. 38). The use refers to the capability of the Executive to enact laws that increase its power and control over the others branches. The abuse means the biased use of the law in favor of ruling party, as well as in detriment of political and social opposition. And the non-use is the end of the rule of law by the Supreme Court, which had been coopted by the ruling party since 2004 (Corrales, 2015). Thus, the autocratic legalism allowed Chávez to transform the weak Venezuelan democracy into an electoral authoritarianism while serving as a stronghold for Maduro to transform the system into an autocratic one.

4.2.6 Maduro: A president who annulled the parliament

The rise to power of Nicolás Maduro generated a constitutional debate. Some experts have pointed out that Mr. Maduro seized the Presidency unconstitutionally. Brewer-Carías (2013) and Hernández (2012) state that because Chávez was not present at the inauguration ceremony on January 10th of 2013, there was a temporary absence of the

President-elect. According to the Constitution, it was the President of the National Assembly who had to temporarily assume the presidency, at least until Chávez returned and could take the oath or, in case he failed to come back in 90 days, it was mandatory to call for elections due to the absolute absence of the President.

However, a verdict from the Supreme Tribunal, dated January 9th of 2013, ruled that since Mr. Chávez had been reelected President for the period 2013-2019, it would be considered an administrative continuity, so that the Vice President and Ministers could continue in their functions. Thus, according to the members of the TSJ, there was not a temporary or absolute absence of the President-elect (Brewer-Carías 2013).

On March 5th, 2013, the government announced President Chávez's death, and it implied a new presidential election in the next thirty days. The National Electoral Council (CNE) called the election for April 14th of 2013. The government nominated Nicolás Maduro, while Henrique Capriles Radonski ran again on behalf of the MUD. The campaign lasted two weeks, and government used all the State's power to promote its candidate. The result was the victory of Maduro 50.61% to 49.12%, with a turnout of 79.68% of registered voters. Capriles alleged that the elections were rigged, but CNE and Supreme Tribunal denied the recount and checks requested by the opposition.

In the legislative arena, the ruling party used all its influence to obtain the required majority to enact an enabling law. That is why the President of the National Assembly during 2011-2015, Diosdado Cabello, worked to dismiss three opposition representatives: Two of them were dismissed by a simple majority, instead of the two-thirds required by the Constitution; the third one was dismissed administratively by the board of the National Assembly. These representatives were replaced by their substitutes, but some of them were coopted and switched from the opposition coalition to an independent party that supported all PSUV initiatives. Also, some representatives were appointed in executive offices by the President, or competed in regional or local elections and won them, abandoning their seats in Parliament. At the end of the legislative term, the number of members was reduced from 165 to 163, the ruling coalition increased their contingent from 98 to 100, and the opposition reduced their seats from 65 to 63; allowing the government to reach the three-fifths necessary to approve a new enabling law (Trak, 2016).

As showed in Table 3, since the beginning of Maduro's presidency, he was granted with decree powers, which allowed him to avoid parliamentary control over his decision-making process. The last two years of this legislative term, the National Assembly was annulled by losing all its influence over the Executive branch. In this scenario, during 2014 the government faced streets turmoil from students, middle classes and some political parties, such as Voluntad Popular (VP), Vente Venezuela (VENTE), and Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP). They named this political movement as "La Salida" (The Way Out), and the main objective was to coerce President Maduro to resign and promote a call for a new presidential election. The result was the harshest repression toward protesters ever seen in Venezuela in the last thirty years, massive violations of Human Rights and

the imprisonment of political leaders such as Leopoldo López (VP) and, a year later, Antonio Ledezma (ABP).

Inside the MUD, a conflict flourished between parties. Some of them supported and encouraged these protests, while others, such as Movimiento Primero Justicia (MPJ), Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), and Acción Democrática (AD), preferred to seek support for the parliamentary elections to be held in December of 2015. In any case, the government used protests as an excuse to close the political system. By the end of 2014, there were more than 100 political prisoners, and International Amnesty (2014) denounced tortures and ill-treatment from the government toward these political prisoners.

The legislative election was held on December 6th of 2015. The government tried to rig the election by taking advantage of its control over the State. According to national and international experts, the campaign was uneven, the government used public resources to promote their candidates, among others electoral malpractices (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello & IDEA Internacional, 2015). Even so, the electoral result favored the MUD with 56.28% of valid votes and 67% of seats, while the PSUV obtained 40% of the voting, and gained 33% of the seats.

This defeat was a turning point in the Venezuelan political process. This result would have as consequence the control of the opposition over more than two-thirds of Parliament. This super-majority allowed the opposition to appoint, without any negotiation with the government, the members of Supreme Tribunal, the National Electoral Council, the Attorney General, and the Ombudsman. Also, the opposition turned into a gatekeeper for the President's initiatives, including the enabling law to rule by decree. In this scenario, Maduro would have to negotiate the budget and the international agreements in almost all economic matters. That is why, three weeks after the election, on December 30th of 2015, the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal annulled the election of four representatives alleging electoral fraud; three of them belonged to the MUD and the other to the PSUV.

Subsequently, during 2016 the Supreme Tribunal enacted at least 49 sentences which take away more than half of the faculties of Parliament (Morales, 2017). According to the members of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal, the Board of the Legislative branch disobeyed the verdict that suspended those four representatives and, therefore, was in contempt of the Court. As a result, the National Assembly was banned from exercising some of its powers, such as the interpellation of members of the Executive or Judiciary branches or members of the National Armed Forces; the appointment of members of the National Electoral Council or the Supreme Tribunal; The approval of emergency powers to the presidency; debating and approving of the national budget; and holding the State of the Nation by the President at the beginning of each year, among others (Morales, 2017). Besides, the court has declared unconstitutional all laws approved by the National Assembly. In sum, the Supreme Tribunal annulled the most important faculties of Parliament, while it has granted the

President emergency powers to rule by decree, appointed members of the National Electoral Council and approved the national budget presented by the President.

This political process had brought as a result the transformation of Venezuelan political system. Hugo Chávez turned a weak democracy into an electoral authoritarianism, in which his charisma and electoral performance allowed him to maintain a democratic facade. However, the poor electoral performance of Nicolás Maduro and the PSUV in 2015 produced a new mutation of the political system, from an electoral authoritarianism toward to an authoritarian regime, in which the Supreme Tribunal along with National Armed Forces have served to grant Maduro more power without any horizontal or vertical accountability process.

5. Elites Ideological Changes

Sani and Sartori (1980) stated that fragmentation has a negative impact on democracy when there is a high degree of polarization. In this sense, as stated previously, when the positions of parties are moderate it is more likely for an agreement between government and opposition. Conversely, when the positions are radical and extreme a gridlock between parties is certain (Chasquetti, 2008; Sani & Sartori, 1980). More recently, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013), point out that the radicalism or moderation in policy preferences have an impact on the political regime. By radical preferences, they mean “intense policy preferences located toward a pole of the policy spectrum.” (Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013, p. 49). Thus, if the main political actors hold radical views on policy preferences it is more likely that they will not tolerate negotiation, which is a central feature of democracy.

To analyze polarization, we use the data gathered by Project of Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) at the University of Salamanca (Alcántara, 1994). PELA conducts surveys among members of the lower houses of parliament in Latin American countries since 1994, in which they ask the position of representatives on a variety the political subjects. In the Venezuelan case, there are three waves of surveys: The first one, among the members of the lower house of Congress, elected in 1993 (1993-1998), the second among representatives elected in the National Assembly in 2000 (2000-2005). The last one was conducted in 2016, to the members of the National Assembly elected in the elections of December 6th of 2015 (2016-2021).

For this analysis, we use the left-right position, which is an indicator that summarizes the stance of representatives on policy issues. Following Downs (1973), the left-right dimensions allow people to reduce information about the position of political parties on economic matters. In the same vein, Sani and Sartori (1980) established that the left-right dimension made sense, not only because it allows comparability between different political systems, but also because it is capable of summarizing the political debate. Additionally, Zechmeister (2006, p. 151) points out that ideology has two purposes: On the one hand, it facilitates communication between parties and their voters. On the

other hand, ideological labels serve as a parameter that allows citizens to assess political situations and make decisions.

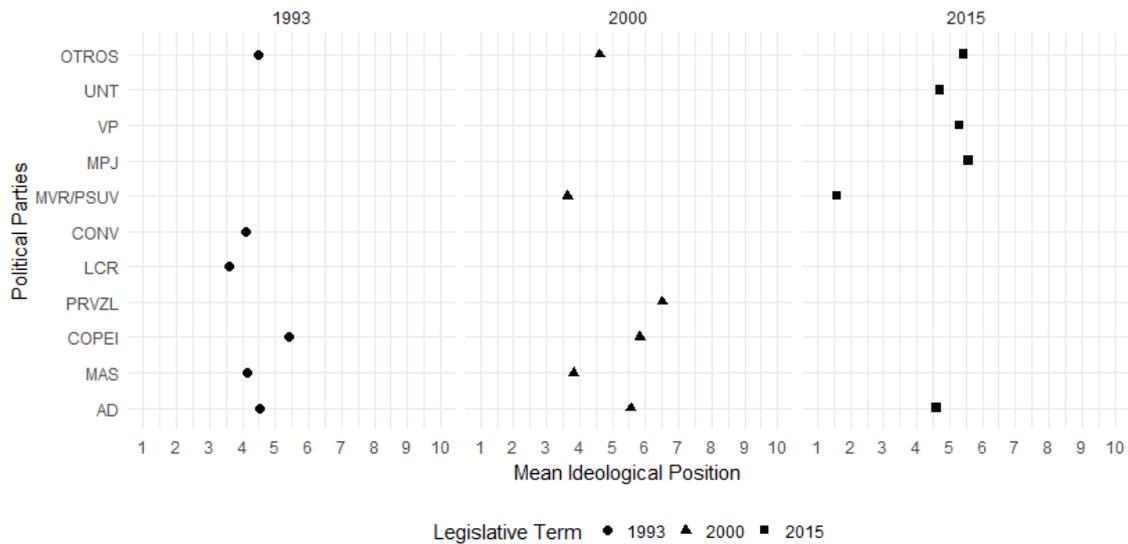
Thus, we use the average ideological self-placement of representatives by the party in order to capture their mean ideological position. The question was present in the three waves of surveys and is worded as follow: "As you know, when we speak about politics the expressions left and right are often used. On this card, there is a series of boxes that go from left to right. According to your political leanings, in which box do you place yourself?" (Alcántara, 1994).

Chart 3 shows the Venezuelan party system had experienced deep transformations not only in the number of parties but also in parties that exist and the ideological position. By 1993, old and new parties shared positions near of the center of the ideological spectrum. La Causa Radical (LCR), a party that represented workers unions, was the party most at the left of the center with a mean position of 3.6. Closest to the center, but still at the left, we find President Caldera' party, Convergencia (CONV), with 4.11 and Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) with 4.13. Acción Democrática had a center-left position with 4.53, and the only party in the center-right was COPEI with an ideological mean of 5.39.

As showed in Table 1, by 2000 the political offer changed dramatically. LCR and CONV lost most of their representatives in Congress, while MVR and PRVZL obtained an important share of seats. In the ideological spectrum, MVR appeared as the most left of the center party with an ideological mean position of 3.64, followed by its ally MAS with 3.83. AD moved from center left to the center right with a mean of 5.56 and COPEI kept its position with an ideological average of 5.83. Finally, Proyecto Venezuela (PRVZL) was the party furthest to the right in 2000 with a mean ideology position of 6.5.

Unfortunately, there are no available data for the National Assembly terms 2006-2010 and 2011-2015, a limitation that makes it hard to tell which parties maintained or changed their ideological positions. In any case, by 2015 the political landscape changed dramatically, and most of the parties with an important quota of representatives in parliament are new. PSUV, formerly MVR, radicalized to the left and its ideological position is 1.59. AD, returned to its center-left position with a mean of 4.60, accompanied by UNT with a mean of 4.71. In the center right, we find MPJ with 5.56 and VP with 5.30. The far right has not a party with an important proportion of representatives inside the National Assembly.

Chart 3. Mean Ideological Position of Parties in Parliament in 1993, 2000 and 2015.



Source: Authors with data from PELA (Alcántara, 1994)

The results delivered in Chart 3 indicate that party in government has radicalized its position since the moment it seized power in 1998. This pattern of radicalization can be observed when we calculate the polarization between the most extreme parties. In 1993, the polarization between LCR and COPEI was 1.79. In 2000 the polarization between MVR and PRVZL raised to 2.89. In 2015, PSUV and MPJ have a polarization index of 3.97. This radicalization crystallized after the victory of Chávez in 2006 when he formally proposed the construction of his 21st Century Socialism and attempted to change the Constitution approved in 1999 to increase presidential powers and change the principles of democracy toward a communal state. Since then the government started a massive policy of expropriation of private companies while increasing control over the economy. This ideological radicalization also implied a systematic attack on the press and mass media, as well as the selective pursuit of opposition leaders. As we have pointed out previously, during the Chávez years a weak democracy was transformed into an electoral authoritarianism, being the massive electoral support and the high prices of oil revenues the most important tool to keep legitimacy among citizens. However, the lack of both resources has led President Maduro to close the political system even more than Chávez.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, we've set out to analyze the changes and continuities of the Venezuelan political process in the last three decades. In doing so, we have described the complex political, economic and social context in an effort to offer a better understanding of the Venezuelan dynamic, signed by autocratization, profound instability, a collapsed economy and a volatile social landscape.

We then analyzed the collapse of the Venezuelan party system, tracing it back to the

1990s and exploring its evolution, through the relations between the Executive and Legislative branches of power. A look at the Venezuelan institutional design led us to study presidentialism and electoral rules, presidential powers and constitutional powers, as well as partisan powers, taking into account the administrations of Carlos Andrés Pérez, Rafael Caldera, Hugo Chávez, and Nicolás Maduro.

The transformation of the political system in Venezuela is an example of how the collapse of a party and political system lead a formerly stable electoral democracy toward a competitive authoritarianism and, when it loses electoral support, toward autocratization. The latter was legitimized to a certain degree among the population through a combination of favorable economic conditions during the high oil price boom, an aggressive social policy and the promotion of clientelistic networks.

Notwithstanding, from our point of view, the advances of the autocratization process are a result of the colonization of check and balance institutions by Hugo Chávez. In this sense, the collapse of the party system opened the door for a charismatic leader to draw a new relationship between the State, the ruling party, and citizens, in which all institutions strived to serve the President.

However, the deinstitutionalization of political parties also played a fundamental role in this process. The lack of an effective political opposition during Chávez's first term allowed him to take control over the republican institutions, which had the responsibility of controlling the Executive power. Thus, an opposition-less Parliament during 2006-2010 allowed Chávez to further expand his concentration of power, while society enjoyed the revenues coming from high oil prices.

When the opposition agreed on the foundation of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), the political institutions that should protect democracy were already under the control of the ruling party, allowing President Nicolás Maduro to maintain power in spite of the deep economic, political and social crisis, and despite his financial and charismatic shortcomings. In this sense, Chávez had already protected his successor by coopting the Supreme Tribunal, the National Electoral Council, and the Armed Forces, as well as destroying the capacity of civil society to mobilize in order to demand a real change in the political process or in its authorities.

The Venezuelan case helps to understand the hypothesis according to which the most important variable to explain a democratic breakdown is not the number of parties in parliament, but the polarization among political organizations. This being the case, a high level of fragmentation is not so much the problem, as is the radicalization of the ruling elite, which wants to impose its policies and assure its stay in power without regard for the democratic process.

As we close this chapter, the Maduro regime has proposed a National Constituent Assembly as a solution to the deep political conflict that has seen millions of Venezuelans take to the streets in protest. The basis of that Assembly, however, appears to draw a setback for Venezuelan democracy, considering the fact that, in Mr. Maduro's proposal, and unlike the ANC spearheaded by Chávez in 1999, universal vote would be

restricted, favoring “sectorial” voting that many fear translates into Mr. Maduro choosing the candidates himself. With this, Mr. Maduro deepens Venezuela’s transition from a competitive authoritarianism toward a hegemonic one, commonly referred to as a dictatorship.

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