

SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA: DOES TRUST IN HUGO CHÁVEZ PLAY ANY ROLE?

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Abstract: By applying regression analysis to data from the 2010 Latin American Public Opinion Project's "AmericasBarometer" surveys, this paper examines the correlates of citizen support for democracy in Venezuela. Special attention is paid to evaluations of current economic conditions, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and trust in the President as potential explanatory variables. The analysis of the models reveals at least two conceptions of democracy present among Venezuelans, which are strongly influenced by the degree of trust in the President citizens feel. The findings suggest the need of studying support for democracy through more complex scopes, in order to acquire better understandings of citizens' attitudes towards their political systems.

Keywords: support for democracy, trust in the President, Venezuela, Hugo Chávez

Resumen: Mediante la aplicación de análisis de regresión a datos de las encuestas "AmericasBarometer" del 2010, este artículo examina las fuentes de apoyo ciudadano a la democracia en Venezuela. Atención especial es prestada a las evaluaciones del estado de la economía, satisfacción con el funcionamiento de la democracia y confianza en el Presidente como potenciales variables explicativas. El análisis de los modelos permite ver por lo menos dos

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concepciones de democracia presentes entre los venezolanos, que son fuertemente influenciadas por el nivel de confianza en el Presidente que los ciudadanos sienten. Los resultados sugieren la necesidad de estudiar el apoyo a la democracia a través de enfoques más complejos, con el objetivo de obtener mejores comprensiones de las actitudes ciudadanas hacia sus sistemas políticos.

Palabras clave: apoyo a la democracia, confianza en el Presidente, Venezuela, Hugo Chávez

Introduction

Understanding citizens' attitudes towards their political systems is a matter of utmost importance for students of democratization. Among the primary concerns of the studies in this area is the monitoring of popular support for democracy. Generalized support for democratic rule has been regarded by many scholars as a healthy characteristic of a democracy (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Dalton, 1999, 2004; Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Easton, 1975; Fuchs, Guidorossi, & Svensson, 1995; Linz, 1978; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Lipset, 1959, 1994). In this sense, unconditional support for democracy -support which is stable through time and held under any circumstance- has been argued to be a guarantee of stability for any democratic regime. As Russell Dalton has put it, "a democratic political system requires a reservoir of diffuse support independent of immediate policy outputs if it is to weather periods of public dissatisfaction" (1999: 59).

Important differences have been found between advanced and developing democracies regarding their citizens' commitments to the ideal of democracy (Lagos, 2003a; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Mishler & Rose, 2001). Advanced democracies are characterized by majoritarian and stable citizen support for democratic rule. In these nations, citizens

might be dissatisfied with the functioning of the political system, and even disenchanted with politics in general, but will still tend to maintain preferences for democratic rule over other forms of government (Dalton, 1999, 2004; Norris, 1999). Support for democracy here is not affected by short-term fluctuations in the economy or the political scenario: it is a long-lasting attitude that does not change with ease. The situation in newly-established or developing democracies is quite different. In these contexts, citizen support for democratic rule has been found to vary significantly across countries and through time. There is evidence that citizens in many young democracies will change their preferences for democratic rule with ease, being significantly influenced by economic and political events (Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Sarsfield & Echegaray, 2008).

Having in mind these differences between advanced and developing democracies, this article seeks to examine the correlates of citizen support for democracy in Venezuela. It does so by looking at the relationship between democratic support and variables that tap citizens' evaluations of the current state of affairs in their country, concentrating on evaluations of both the economical and political spheres. Is support for democracy in Venezuela unconditional? Or are citizens subduing their preferences for democracy to factors such as evaluations of the economy or the political situation?

Special attention is paid to the role of citizen trust in their President as a possible explanatory variable. Does trust in Hugo Chávez have an effect in Venezuelans' support for democracy? One of the interests driving this article is to find out if the presence of a highly controversial President may influence citizen support for democracy. Hugo Chávez is (even if deceased) a charismatic figure who has concentrated most of the attention when it comes to debates about Venezuelan politics in the last decade. Very

strong -and opposed- positions are held regarding him, both inside Venezuela and in the rest of the world. Being so salient in the Venezuelan political scenario, do attitudes towards him affect citizens' attitudes towards democratic rule in any way?²

Political support and its measurement

Most research concentrating on citizens' attitudes towards political systems has departed from David Easton's ideas on political support. More than forty years ago, Easton put forward the idea that political support should be considered a multidimensional concept (Easton, 1965, 1975). He originally coined a dual conceptualization of support that could account both for evaluations of authorities' performance ('specific' support) and for attitudes towards more basic and fundamental aspects of the political system ('generalized' or 'diffuse' support). "Support is not all of a piece," he argued, and its constituent classes could vary independently from each other (1975: 437).

On the one hand, Easton defines 'specific' support as the type related to the "satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities" (1975: 437). It may include both evaluations according to the extent to which citizen demands have been met and evaluations tapping perceived general performance of the system and its authorities. It is, by definition, conditional on perceived benefits and satisfactions. Generalized, or 'diffuse' support,

² At the time this article was originally written, Hugo Chávez was still alive and holding the Presidential Office in Venezuela. Despite the recent changes in the Venezuelan political scenario, the influence Chávez continues to have in Venezuelan politics is undeniable. It is thus safe to assume that the relevance of this article remains unchanged.

on the other hand, is related to the “evaluations of what an object is or represents –to the general meaning it has for a person– not of what it does” (1975: 444). This type of support has been related to the “affective” orientations citizens have towards political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999). Generalized support is more durable and shows fewer fluctuations than specific support, and is normally independent of outputs and performance in the short run. It is the “reservoir of favorable attitudes” (Easton, 1975: 444) that allows members of a system accept or tolerate policy outputs to which they are opposed while maintaining esteem for the democratic principles.

The original idea of Easton was that people who showed ‘diffuse’ support for a political system would in general accept the authorities chosen through it. But they could also lose trust in these authorities and be dissatisfied with the functioning of their system while maintaining support for its fundamental principles. ‘Diffuse’ support and low levels of ‘specific’ support can live together: up to a certain threshold, they appear to be not strongly related. And as Easton himself proposes, “it is the unpredictability of the relationship between political dissatisfaction and tension on the one hand and the acceptance of basic political arrangements on the other that constitutes a persistent puzzle for research” (1975: 437).

While the basic distinction of political support into ‘specific’ and ‘diffuse’ has gained widespread acceptance among academics, no agreement has been achieved in terms of the proper way to assess it through empirical research. Different understandings of Easton’s ideas have led to a variety of schemes, approaches and indicators designed to study the nature and structure of political support. Discussions regarding which indicators are more appropriate for measuring both ‘specific’ and ‘diffuse’ support date back to the 1970’s, when authors debated whether

the increasing levels of discontent shown in surveys in the United States reflected attitudes towards the incumbents or towards the democratic regime in general (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974). Forty years later the debate is still open: indicators which have been used to measure both types of support have been strongly and recurrently criticized. There is no academic agreement on how exactly Easton's theory should be interpreted or empirically tested.

In democratic systems, when seeking to assess Easton's 'diffuse' support, political analysts have heavily relied on the concept of 'support for democracy'. Two standard questions have been frequently used in public opinion surveys in the last thirty years to monitor this concept. The first one, derived from Churchill's famous dictum about democracy, asks citizens to agree or disagree with the statement "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government"³ (Booth & Seligson, 2005; Dalton, 2004; Huang, Chang, & Chu, 2008; Inglehart, 2003; Klingemann, 1999; Seligson, 2007). The second one builds on Juan Linz's theorizing on democratic breakdown, and asks respondents with which of the following statements do they "most agree": (a) "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government", (b) "Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government could be preferable to a democratic one" or (c) "To people like me, it is the same to have a democratic or non-democratic regime" (Bratton, 2002; Fuchs *et al.*, 1995; Lagos, 2003a, 2008; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Sarsfield & Echegaray, 2006). Most

³ The complete quote attributed to Churchill is: "Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". Sir Winston Churchill, from a speech in the House of Commons given on November 11th, 1947.

research that has used both of these 'classic' indicators for measuring support for democracy has assumed that they capture unconditional –'diffuse'– beliefs about the superiority of democracy.

In an important contribution, Mishler and Rose (2001) argue that measuring democratic support in what they label 'incomplete' democracies is better achieved through a different kind of approach, which they call 'realist'. This view differs from the traditional –'idealist'– approach in that it "avoids abstract, ambiguous and idealistic labels such as democracy" (2001: 307). Mishler and Rose argue that 'realist' measures of support are superior to 'idealist' ones in several respects: they tap 'real' attitudes, have greater face validity, and have greater generality (2001: 315). An example of a question belonging to the 'realist' approach would ask citizens about their attitudes to their 'political system', avoiding in that sense the bias that introducing a term like 'democracy' could produce in their answers.

When it comes to the assessment of Easton's 'specific' support, political analysts have repeatedly relied on the concept of 'satisfaction with the functioning of democracy'. This concept has traditionally been measured through one 'classical' indicator: most of the important survey programs around the world (American National Election Studies, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, European Social Survey, AmericasBarometers, *Latinobarómetro*, Afrobarometer) use variations of the following question: "How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (country)?" and most of them include a four point unipolar scale with the categories 'very satisfied', 'fairly satisfied', 'not very satisfied' and 'not at all satisfied' as possible answers. Answers to this question have shown to be strongly related to economic fluctuations and political events, and to rapidly change in time. In this sense, they have been said to tap 'specific' political support.

Support for democracy: advanced vs. developing democracies

Since the worldwide spread of democratic regimes in the 1970's, a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to understanding the sources of citizen support for democracy, both in advanced and developing democracies. Despite the great efforts deployed in explaining the individual level factors that influence citizens' preferences for democratic rule, no clear consensus has been achieved among scholars. Explanations have stressed the roles of early socialization processes (Easton & Dennis, 1967; Inglehart, 2003), interpersonal trust and social capital (Putnam, 1993), institutional arrangements (Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Norris, 1999), or the performance of democratic institutions and leaders (Evans & Whitefield, 1995; Whitefield & Evans, 1999). While all of these factors have been shown to play a role, the variation of their influence across contexts has been significant and few sound conclusions have been reached.

Recent literature has shown that there are important differences between advanced and developing democracies regarding citizens' commitments to the ideal of democracy (Lagos, 2003a; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Mishler & Rose, 2001). Advanced democracies are characterized by the presence of a vast majority of citizens who agree that democracy is the best and always preferable political arrangement. Aggregate levels of democratic support reported in most advanced industrial democracies have been stable for decades at levels of around 80% of the population (Dalton, 1999, 2004; Fuchs *et al.*, 1995; Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 1999). If in the 1970's authors were concerned that democracy may have been at risk because of high citizen discontent with politics (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975; Miller, 1974), these worries have now vanished. Support for

democratic rule is considered a given fact in North America and Western Europe, to the point that the European Social Survey –possibly the most important survey monitoring public attitudes in Europe– has omitted questions on the subject. This does not necessarily mean that citizens in these societies are satisfied with the way democracy works in their nations: in fact, many advanced democracies show remarkably high levels of citizen dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy coexisting with high and stable levels of support for the concept of democracy (Lagos, 2003a). But it does mean that the democratic ideal has found a safe place among the citizens of advanced democracies.

In newly established and developing democracies the picture is quite different. Aggregate levels of support for the democratic regime have been found to vary significantly across countries and through time (Lagos, 2003a). Support for democracy in these contexts has shown to be volatile, as Lagos shows for the Latin American region, where it can depend on evaluations of the economic and political situations, and partisan and ideological variations (2003b, 2008). Support for the democratic regime in these societies is not unconditional: there is evidence of a strong presence of utilitarian and instrumental reasoning influencing citizens' attitudes towards democracy (Bratton, 2002; Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Sarsfield & Echegaray, 2006, 2008). Economical and political performance have shown to correlate with citizens' attitudes (Mishler & Rose, 2001), as well as dissatisfaction with the way the system is functioning, discontent with high levels of corruption and a perception of general lack of receptivity of the political representatives (Diamond, 2002). Democratic support in many of these cases seems to be capturing both deep-rooted attitudes and utilitarian calculations: while some citizens might be truly convinced that democracy is the best form of government in all instances, there is sound evidence

showing that an important portion of the publics of these countries is only circumstantially expressing support, and that their preferences may change in very short periods of time (Bratton & Mattes, 2001).

Hypotheses

As already stated, contradictory evidence has been recently found regarding the factors that are related to citizen support for democracy. At the theoretical level, however, there is general agreement that support for democracy is a measure of 'diffuse' political support, and thus, that it should not be strongly related to immediate evaluations of the performance of the system or its authorities. Departing from this general idea about the nature of democratic support, this article tests the following three hypotheses in the Venezuelan case:

H1: There is no relationship between current economic evaluations and support for democracy.

H2: There is no relationship between evaluations of the performance of the system and support for democracy.

H3: There is no relationship between trust in the President and support for democracy.

To obtain a fuller understanding of the issues at stake, two multiple regression models will be specified: the first for a 'traditional' measure of support for democracy ('idealist' support, in Mishler and Rose's terms) and the second for a 'realist' measure of democratic support. In both cases the three hypotheses remain unchanged: support for democracy, whether understood in an 'idealist' or 'realist' fashion, in theory should not be related to evaluations of the economy, of the functioning of the political system, or to trust in the President.

Data

The analyses in this paper are conducted using data from Venezuela of the fourth wave of the “AmericasBarometer” surveys, conducted by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)⁴ in 2010. In the “AmericasBarometer” 2010 round, 26 countries throughout the Americas and the Caribbean were included, and over 36000 individuals were interviewed in total. In Venezuela, the project used a national probability sample design of voting-age adults, with a total N of 1500 people. It involved face-to-face interviews conducted in Spanish. The survey used a complex sample design, taking into account stratification and clustering. The sample consisted of six strata representing the six main geographical regions in Venezuela: Metropolitan area (capital,) Zuliana, West, Mid-west, East and Los Llanos.⁵

Dependent variables

To examine ‘idealist’ support for democracy in Venezuela the classic ‘Churchillian’ indicator is used. The question asks respondents to agree or disagree with the statement “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government”. Respondents are given a 7-point scale which ranges from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, and they are asked to choose one point in the scale. The assumption is that the more someone ‘agrees’ with the statement (gives a higher score in the scale,) the

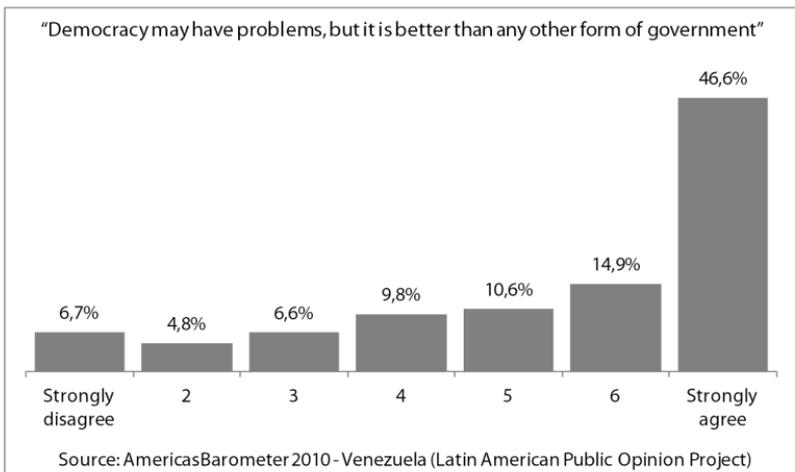
⁴ I thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.

⁵ Taken from http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/venezuela/Venezuela_2010_Tech_Info.pdf Date of consult: April 8th, 2011. For further information, visit LAPOP’s website at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

more he/she believes in the superiority of democracy over other political arrangements.

As Figure 1 shows, at a first glance, support for democracy in Venezuela seems quite high. Over seventy percent of the sample chose the higher three answer categories, and almost half of the sample strongly agreed with the idea that although democracy may have problems, it is the best political system possible. A minority of around sixteen percent answered in the lower three categories, while only seven percent of the sample strongly disagreed with the statement.

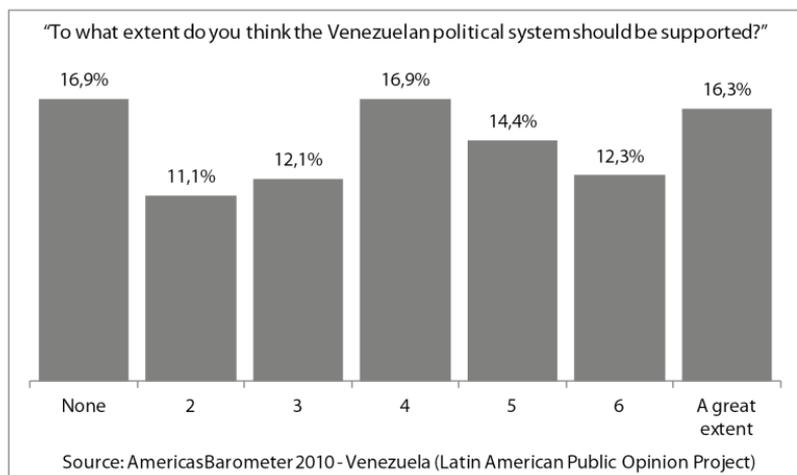
Figure 1. Idealist support for democracy



To assess the second dependent variable analyzed in this article, 'realist' support for democracy, a question about 'support for the political system' is used. The question asks respondents the following: "To what extent do you think the Venezuelan political system should be supported?" Respondents are again given a 7-point scale which ranges from "none" to "a great extent" to express their answer.

As in the previous case, the implication is that the higher the number they choose as their answer, the more they are expressing support for their political system. As said, this question is supposed to capture a 'realist' version of citizens' attitudes towards democracy, by asking citizens to evaluate regimes as they have personally experienced them, without referring to "abstract and ambiguous democratic ideals" (Mishler & Rose, 2001: 306).

Figure 2. Realist support for democracy
(Support for the political system)



The distribution of answers to the 'system support' question in Venezuela (Figure 2) is completely different to that of the 'support for democracy' question. The three largest groups of respondents are located on three very different points of the scale: at the two extremes and at the midpoint. This tri-modal distribution implies there is no agreement among Venezuelans when it comes to believing if their political system deserves support or not. This type of distribution already suggests that the questions

about support for the democratic ideal and support for the operating political system are not measuring the same in all individuals: some Venezuelans may be in fact making a distinction when expressing their attitudes about both issues.

Independent variables

To be able to test the proposed hypotheses for the 'realist' and 'idealist' measures of support for democracy, seven independent variables are included in both regression models. A first set of variables aims to test hypothesis number one, which states that there is no relationship between current economic evaluations and support for democracy. For this purpose, two questions asking about different economic evaluations are used. The first one refers to citizens' personal economic situation and asks respondents "In general, how would you rate your personal economic situation?" offering five possible answers: "very good", "good", "neither good nor bad", "bad" or "very bad". The second question refers to the country's economic situation and asks "How would you rate the country's economic situation?" having the same five answer categories available to respondents.

To test hypotheses number two, which states that "there is no relationship between evaluations of the performance of the system and support for democracy", the classic 'satisfaction with democracy' question is used as an only indicator. This question asks respondents "In general, are you (a) very satisfied, (b) satisfied, (c) unsatisfied, or (d) very unsatisfied with the way democracy functions in Venezuela?". As the question refers to the functioning of democracy and not to the concept of democracy itself, it is supposed to tap citizens' general evaluations of the performance of the system (Easton's 'specific' political support).

To test hypothesis number three, which states that there is no relationship between trusting the President and support for democracy, one indicator is used. It asks "To what

extent do you have trust in the President?”. Respondents are asked to place themselves on a seven-step ‘ladder’ that offers answers that range from 1 (‘none’) to 7 (‘a great extent’).

Finally, a group of social background variables that includes gender, age and education level is used for control in both models. When needed, independent variables were recoded from negative to positive to facilitate the interpretation of results.

Results

Table 1 presents the multiple regression estimates obtained for the model of the ‘idealist’ (‘Churchillian’) measure of support for democracy. The numbers reported are the standardized (beta) coefficients.

Table 1.- Multiple Regression Estimates for ‘Idealist’ Support for Democracy

Gender (female)	-0,02
Age	0,08**
Education level	0,12***
Country’s current economic situation	-0,02
Personal current economic situation	0,02
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0,00
Trust in the President	0,04
N	1397
R	0,13
R²	0,02

Note: Standardized coefficients (β). Significance level: * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$.

Source: “AmericasBarometer” 2010 - Venezuela (Latin American Public Opinion Project).

The variation of responses to the 'Churchillian' support for democracy question is not strongly related to any of the variables included in the model. While there are two variables that show statistically significant coefficients, it would be imprudent to assume these variables have any strong substantive relationship to Venezuelans' preferences for democracy. The model accounts for only two percent of the variability of answers to the support for democracy question, and thus any speculation about possible causal effects is, to say the least, adventurous. In sum, variations in the degree to which citizens express a preference for democracy are not being determined by socio-demographics, evaluations of general performance of the system, economic evaluations, or trust in the President—at least not in the terms these variables are included in this model—.

Having clarified this, it is still interesting to look at the two variables that have statistically significant coefficients in the model. Both of them are socio-demographic variables: age and education level. They both show positive, significant coefficients, implying that older and more educated citizens tend to support democracy more. A possible explanation to the positive relationship between age and support for democracy is that Venezuelans from older generations have experienced dictatorships and thus include comparisons between authoritarian regimes and democratic ones when answering the survey questions related to the topic. This in turn would lead them to show stronger support for democracy than citizens who have never experienced dictatorships and cannot make any comparisons. The positive relationship between education level and support for democracy is not surprising, as citizens with higher education have been found repeatedly to appreciate the virtues of democracy more than citizens with lower levels of education (Dennis, 1966; Evans & Whitefield, 1995).

Interestingly, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and evaluations of the economy, variables that

have been found to correlate with support for democracy in developing democracies, show no effect at all in Venezuela. It is very saying that the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy variable has a coefficient of virtually zero. The same is true for trust in the President, which has a substantively small, statistically non-significant coefficient. All three hypotheses proposed are confirmed for the 'idealist' measure of support for democracy: no relationship is found between democratic support and (i) evaluations of the economy, (ii) of the performance of the system, and (iii) trust in the President. It would appear Venezuelans' preferences for democratic rule are not being affected by immediate policy outputs or attitudes towards the incumbent.

Table 2 presents the multiple regression estimates obtained for the model of the 'realist' measure of support for democracy, or 'support for the political system.' The numbers shown are the standardized (beta) coefficients.

Table 2.- Multiple Regression Estimates for 'Realist' Support for Democracy
(Support for the political system)

Gender (female)	-0,01
Age	0,02
Education level	-0,01
Country's current economic situation	0,03
Personal current economic situation	0,03
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0,17***
Trust in the President	0,57***
N	1364
R	0,72
R²	0,52

Note: Standardized coefficients (β). Significance level: * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$.

Source: "AmericasBarometer" 2010 - Venezuela (Latin American Public Opinion Project).

The model for support for the political system ('realist' support for democracy) yields drastically different results. The first thing that strikes is the fifty two percent explained variation of the dependent variable the model accounts for (versus the two percent found in the 'idealist' support for democracy model). This means that over half of the variation of responses to the question of how much Venezuelans think their political system should be supported is actually explained by the variation of responses to the independent variables included in the model.

Citizens' economic evaluations, be them of the country or personal level, show no relationship at all to Venezuelans' support for their political system. The two dimensions seem to be completely unrelated. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed for the model of 'realist' support for democracy as well: no relationship is found between current economic evaluations and support for democracy.

Most, if not all, of system support's explained variation comes from two variables: in first place, trust in the President, and to a lesser extent, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Both factors show substantially strong, statistically significant coefficients. In this model, hypotheses 2 and 3 have to be rejected: the measure of 'realist' democratic support shows strong relationships to both (i) evaluations of the performance of the system, and (ii) trust in the President.

The seemingly strong relationship between trust in the President and 'realist' support for democracy is particularly relevant. Trust in the President shows, with great difference, the largest coefficient out of all the explanatory variables included in the model. Is this enough evidence to conclude support for the political system is strongly influenced by attitudes towards Chávez? The Venezuelan President occupies a central position in the nation's political scene; when speaking and thinking about politics

in Venezuela, his figure is without doubt more salient to citizens than a general and abstract concept such as the 'political system.' In first instance, it seems safe to argue that Venezuelans' feelings towards Chávez act as a cause in determining their attitudes towards other political objects rather than as an effect.

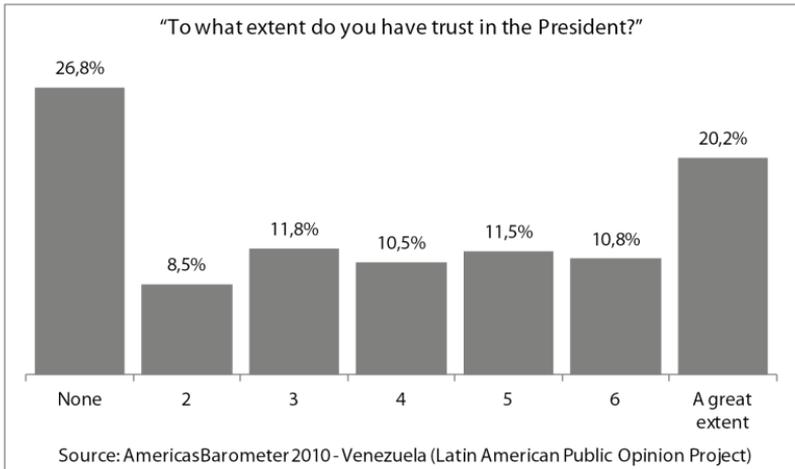
A closer look at the relationship between trust in the President and support for democracy

How important is the figure of Hugo Chávez in determining Venezuelans' support for democracy? While in the regression analyses no relationship was found between trusting Chávez and the measure of 'idealist' support for democracy, a strong relationship between trusting him and supporting the country's political system was observed. What implications do these findings have?

Venezuelan society has been repeatedly described as being polarized around the figure of its President.⁶ Figure 3 shows the distribution of answers to the 'Trust in the President' question in the 2010 "AmericasBarometer" Venezuela survey. While more than a quarter of the sample responded they feel "no trust at all" towards Chávez, an important group of approximately twenty percent reported trusting him to "a great extent," the highest answer category possible. Another important group of around a third of the sample placed itself in the middle categories of the scale (scores 3-5).

⁶ The results of the last presidential election of April 14th, 2013, where there was an almost equal split of the vote between Nicolás Maduro and Henrique Capriles, are a clear sign of the extreme political polarization present today in Venezuelan society.

Figure 3. Trust in the President



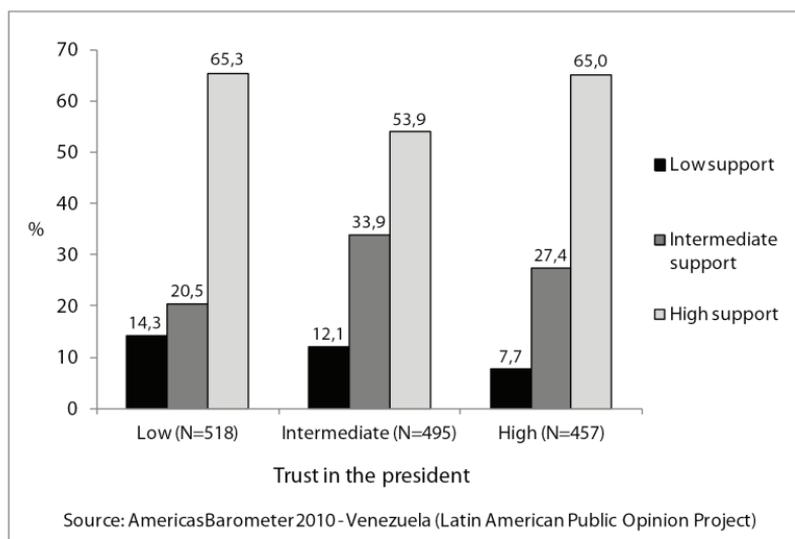
To perform a closer examination of the relationship between trust in the President and support for democracy, the sample was divided into three groups of citizens, depending on their level of trust in Chávez: those with 'low' trust towards him (scores 1-2), those with 'intermediate' trust towards him (scores 3-5), and those who show 'high' trust (scores 6-7). The three groups resulted very similar in size, each being composed of close to a third of the sample.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses to the 'idealist' support for democracy question for the three groups of 'trust in the President' citizens.⁷ Regardless of where citizens situate themselves on the trust towards Chávez question, there is a general tendency to support democracy, confirming the null relationship found between the

⁷ For the construction of this figure, the 'idealist' support for democracy question was recoded in the following way: scores 1-2 = 'low support for democracy', scores 3-5 = 'intermediate support for democracy', scores 6-7 = 'high support for democracy'.

two variables in the regression analysis. In all three groups there is a majority of citizens who express high support for democracy; and in the two groups where citizens have the most extreme attitudes towards Chávez –low trust and high trust– the value is practically the same: a strong 65 percent.

Figure 4. Support for democracy for 3 levels of 'Trust in the President'



By introducing the third variable at stake, 'support for the political system', or 'realist' support for democracy, the picture becomes clearer. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between 'idealist' and 'realist' measures of support for democracy for the three levels of 'trust in the President'.⁸

⁸ For the construction of this table, the support for the system question was recoded in the following way: scores 1-2 = 'low support', scores 3-5 = 'intermediate support', scores 6-7 = 'high support'.

Table 3.- Crosstable between 'idealist' and 'realist' measures of support for democracy for 3 levels of 'Trust in the President'

	Support for the system		Support for democracy ('idealist')		
			Low	Intermediate	High
Low trust in the President (N=508)	Support for the system	Low	9,3%	12,4%	40,9%
		Intermediate	4,5%	5,9%	18,3%
		High	0,6%	2,4%	5,7%
	Total		14,4%	20,7%	64,9%
Intermediate trust in the President (N=470)	Support for the system	Low	1,7%	4,7%	8,3%
		Intermediate	7,7%	24,7%	38,1%
		High	2,8%	4,5%	7,7%
	Total		12,2%	33,9%	54,1%
High trust in the President (N=444)	Support for the system	Low	0,2%	0,5%	1,4%
		Intermediate	2,0%	13,5%	16,2%
		High	5,6%	13,7%	46,8%
	Total		7,8%	27,7%	64,4%

Note: Cells are percentages of the total for each 'Trust in the President' group.
Source: "AmericasBarometer" 2010 - Venezuela (Latin American Public Opinion Project).

At least two well defined groups of citizens can be distinguished in Table 3. Close to half (46,8%) of the citizens that feel high trust towards Hugo Chávez also show high support for the political system and for the ideal of democracy. This group of citizens (which accounts for approximately 15% of the total sample) could be labeled the 'Chavist' democrats: most likely, they will agree that Chávez is a democrat, and that the Venezuelan political system is an operating democracy. They find no incompatibilities in supporting the ideal of democracy ('idealist' support) and supporting their operating political system ('realist' support): for them, democracy is what they are living in at the moment.

A second important group of citizens can be considered the opposite: the 'Anti-Chavist' democrats, if you will. They have remarkably low trust towards the President and low support for the political system, but still believe democracy is the best possible political arrangement. They make up 40,9% of the persons in the 'low trust' group, which is equivalent to a 15% of the total sample - a strikingly similar proportion to the one of the 'Chavist' democrats. The differences observed here between supporting the ideal of democracy and the operating political system could be explained through the hypothesis that people in this group will most likely qualify Chávez as a dictator and Venezuela's system as a dictatorship. Democracy is something they don't have, it is something desired. Thus, while they express high esteem for the ideal of democracy, they will express very low support for the operating political system.

Other groups of citizens are also visible. Around a tenth of the citizens in the low trust group (close to a 4% of the complete sample) have constant negative attitudes towards democracy. They do not trust Chávez, do not believe their political system should be supported, and have lost faith (on never had any) in the ideal of democracy. While it could

be hurried to call them 'antidemocrats,' they at least seem disillusioned. Things are not going well, and democracy, which is not working fine, would not help much even if it was working better. From this position to preferring the presence of authoritarian regimes there is probably not much ideological travelling to be done. Another group of similar size is the one which shows the same characteristics but 'intermediate' support for democracy. They do not trust Chávez, do not express support for their political system, but express 'intermediate' support for the ideal of democracy: they might still have some hope about the possibility of a true democracy being able to work things out, but they may very well be on their way to complete disillusionment.

Conclusions

There is evidence to conclude that there are at least two different conceptions of what democracy is among Venezuelans. Most citizens express belief in the superiority of democracy, but it appears as if some believe democracy is what they are living in at the moment, and others believe it is something they do not –but would like to– have.⁹ The presence of different conceptions of what democracy is opens the debate about the validity of the traditional support for democracy indicators when used by themselves. Without knowing what citizens are referring to when they answer

⁹ Hugo Chávez's death and the changes in the political scenario that have recently taken place in Venezuela only reinforce this conclusion. All in the name of 'democracy,' the nation finds itself strongly polarized between two opposing forces: Maduro has taken the legacy of the 'Chavist' conception of democracy, and the opposition, personified in Capriles, accuses the current regime of being a dictatorship and demands a 'true' democracy to be installed.

questions about an abstract construct such as ‘democracy’, it is very difficult to know what their answers to these questions actually mean. In fact, recent literature has cast doubts on the common practices used to measure support for democracy, which have mostly used a unidimensional perspective (Carlin & Singer, 2011; Inglehart, 2003; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). The possibility that citizens answer survey questions on the topic from multiple perspectives suggests that support for democracy is a polysemic concept, and that it should be conceived –and measured– as such. This implies the need of using several indicators which cover distinct dimensions of democratic support.

Trust in Hugo Chávez does not seem to play an important role in determining Venezuelans’ support for the ideal of democracy; where it appears to be significant is in defining what democracy is for Venezuelans. As was seen, a good proportion of the citizens who trust Chávez seem to have a very different conception of what democracy is to those citizens who do not trust him at all. While it cannot be established with complete certainty, it seems safe to argue that the causal effect goes in the direction pointed out: at least in some cases, trust in Chávez affects citizens’ definitions of democracy, and not the other way around.

As well, due to the multiple conceptions of democracy found among Venezuelans, it becomes problematic to consider a heterogeneous understanding of support for democracy as a guarantee of stability for the democratic system. Is the high level of support for the ideal of democracy found in Venezuela really a guarantee of stability for its democratic regime? Or do the different –and encountered– conceptions of democracy pose a threat to the democratic institutions and regime in general? It may be argued in this case that a first glance at the ‘traditional’ indicators suggests democracy is not in crisis in Venezuela,

but the profound polarization of its society may be in fact an indicator of the fragility of its democracy.

Understanding the differences in conceptions of democracy is fundamental for any further research seeking to unveil what the true levels of support for the democratic regime are in different contexts. It seems evident that democracy does not mean the same for everyone, and thus, that the reported levels of support for democracy in many cases are not saying what they seem to be saying. In this line, it is more relevant for future analyses concentrating on support for democracy to ask what models of democracy citizens support and not just if they support democracy or not. Researchers, policy makers, and scholars in general should be sensitive to this if any clear understanding of how citizens in developing democracies relate to their political regimes is to be found.

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