Participation without Deliberation: The Crisis of Venezuelan Democracy

Abstract: The legacy of Hugo Chavez is contentious. Some lament the deterioration of Venezuelan democracy from one of Latin America’s most stable political systems to a populist authoritarian regime. Others celebrate Chavez’s participatory project of institutionalizing structures for community driven development, redistributing oil wealth through welfare policies, and creating a political party closely linked to mass movements. This article provides an alternative assessment of Venezuela’s democratic quality by drawing on deliberative democratic theory. I argue that Chavez’s participatory project is incomplete because it fails to create structures for deliberative politics. Without these mechanisms, Venezuela remains vulnerable to crises brought about by “uncivil action,” such as military coups and violent protests, making deliberation an important component in averting crises in democratizing polities.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, democratization, participatory democracy, Venezuela
Introduction
For the past two decades, Venezuela has presented a mixed picture of a vibrant democracy on the one hand and a diminished subtype of democracy on the other. Some scholars express concern over the deterioration of Venezuelan democracy during the Chavez regime as executive powers increase, political opposition becomes less competitive, and military officers take a greater role in governance. Others interpret these developments more positively. The Chavez regime, for all its flaws, was able to institutionalize participatory democracy by shifting political power from elitist parties to popular movements allied with the state.

In this article, I put forward an alternative assessment of Venezuela’s democratic quality by drawing on deliberative democratic theory. I argue that while there is reasonable scope to celebrate the broadened space for popular participation in a traditionally exclusionary political sphere, the democratizing potential of these spaces is severely limited without linking them to processes of deliberation. Participation without deliberation can result in polarized politics that legitimizes uncivil action as a mechanism to articulate deep disagreements. This, I suggest, leads to a “crisis of participation,” which refers to the political system’s inability to reconcile intense political action from the grassroots to the conflicting demands of elite politics.

I develop this argument in three parts. First, I describe the participatory character of Venezuelan democracy in the Chavez regime. I clarify what I mean by “participatory democracy” and identify its articulations in contemporary Venezuelan politics. In the second part, I examine the weaknesses of this model using a deliberative democratic framework. I argue that political outbursts such as the 2002 attempted coup against Chavez, massive work stoppages, and the recent wave of bloody protests derivative from a system that failed to link democratic participation to public deliberation. In the concluding section, I draw on the Venezuelan case as it is illustrative of the kinds of crises democratic agents face today. I argue that the durability and depth of democratic deepening are contingent on both participation and deliberation. One cannot do without the other in democratic transitions.

Experiments in Participatory Democracy
“Pacted democracy” is the term often used to describe Venezuela before Hugo Chavez was elected president. Similar to the cases of Spain and Chile, post-authoritarian political arrangements in Venezuela were forged through agreements or pacts between Acción
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Democrática (AD) and Copei—two of Venezuela’s major political parties. Among these agreements include respecting the outcome of elections, rejecting military intervention in times of crisis, focusing on technical solutions to resolve immediate problems, and setting aside potentially explosive issues which may compromise democratic stability (Levine 1989). This pact was forged in 1958. Reaching these agreements is not an easy feat (see McCoy and Myers 2006). Compared to its Latin American neighbors, who until the 1980s were ruled by caudillos and military dictators, Venezuela’s democratic regime remained stable—with some political scientists even declaring it as “consolidated”—due to the peaceful transfer of political power through periodic elections between competitive parties.

The durability of democracy built on pacts, however, has its limits. Both supporters and critics of Venezuela’s pacted democracy describe it as an “inter-elite consensus” forged behind closed doors without popular participation (Encarnación 2005). Venezuela’s political system failed to recognize discourses emerging outside the boundaries of party politics and became less representative as new political actors emerged. Church-based groups, neighborhood associations, labor unions, and student organizations who have been critical of AD and Copei’s subscription to neoliberal policies have been left in the margins, while internal contestation within parties were kept to a minimum. AD, for example, deliberately excluded its left-wing faction so as not to cause tensions with other political actors supportive of the pact including military officers and FEDECAMARAS, Venezuela’s business group. As Crisp (1994: 1505) observes, “Venezuelan democracy acts, even more than other democracies, to isolate policy making from popular participation … and provides institutional means for minority interests to exercise influence.”

This is where the limits of Venezuela’s pacted democracy lie. Discrediting critical political actors for the sake of “stability” compels them to find alternative mechanisms to articulate their discontent. AD’s left-wing faction opted out of party politics and joined the armed opposition. In 1989, a week of bloody rioting in Caracas took the lives of more than 1,000 Venezuelans protesting the sharp increase of transport fares as a consequence of newly adopted liberalization policies. In 1992, a group of junior officers headed by then Comandante Chavez launched a failed military coup in defiance of the military’s complicity in massacring citizens involved in the riots. Over 6,000 protests against the political and economic conditions in the country occurred between 1989 and 1998 as citizens increasingly felt discontent with economic and political exclusion (López Maya 2005). These “political outbursts” can be considered derivatives of a system in crisis where institutions of
representative democracy have been compromised by particularistic party interests justified through the discourse of “political stability.”

Chavez’s entry onto the political center stage occurred in this political context. After receiving a presidential pardon from Rafael Caldera in 1994, he successfully launched a presidential bid in 1998. He won 56 percent of the vote, one of the highest percentages in the history of Venezuelan politics. This was a watershed moment for the institutionalization of participatory democracy in Venezuela. By participatory democracy, I refer to the process of broadening the points of leverage from which to achieve a more egalitarian redistribution of power. This is a modified version of Bachrach and Botwinick’s (1992) definition, which considers opening up of spaces for citizen involvement in shaping collective decisions that affect them as facilitative of democratic deepening. There are three main manifestations of this in Venezuela.

First, popular participation is promoted through mechanisms of electoral democracy. By this, I refer not only to Chavez subjecting himself to elections to gain power (instead of imposing his leadership to the nation through a military coup) but also the series of referendums held on a variety of reforms. The first few years of the Chavez regime was defined by a series of elections and referendums related to the new constitution. Voters went to the polls at least four times, and Chavez won each of these elections with overwhelming majority. To a certain extent, features of direct democracy were manifest in the early years of the regime given the frequency and high turnout during referendums.

Second, the process of party building has created new spaces for participation. Chavez’s ascent to power is often dismissed as a product of his charisma or demagoguery but to reduce Chavismo to charisma denies the complex experience of party building of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). PSUV is the consolidation of political parties that supported Chavez’s presidential bid in 1998. The principles of pluralism and participation were integral to its foundation, given that smaller political parties needed guarantees that their voices would be heard in the process of debating its ideological positions and political strategies. Party building also entailed creating internal mechanisms for inclusive participation among all its members. Members are grouped based on their geographic district to debate their understanding of Twenty First Socialism or “twenty-first century socialism.” District representatives, in turn, deliberate on each constituency’s proposal to generate the party’s consolidated program. Their output was subject to a referendum among all members of PSUV. This long deliberative process is part of the reason why the terms of “twenty-first century socialism” are
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century socialism” appear too broad, if not empty, given that the process of party building has only—and perhaps quite reasonably—reached consensus on the level of principle while the precise details of its realization have remained open to discussion. Such structure of party representation keeps the so-called “personality cult” of Hugo Chavez in check as new leaders emerge from grassroots organizations who can analyze and critique the path the regime is taking (Burbach and Piñeiro 2007).

Finally, mechanisms for community-based participatory governance were institutionalized. While often disparaged as another form of “Castro-communism,” Chavez’s “twenty first century socialism” constitutionally mandated features of participatory practice. As Article 62 of the Bolivarian constitution states: “The participation of the people in the formation, execution and control of public matters is the means necessary to accomplish the protagonismo that will guarantee their complete development, both individually and collectively.” The emphasis on popular participation is a sharp contrast to the Soviet-style experience of centralized and hierarchical control of the political and economic system. The regime underscored the importance of communal councils where citizens initiate petitions, co-nominate candidates to the Supreme Court, revoke the mandate of elected officials, and audit state institutions. These Councils, of course, are not without fault. One major weakness is the gap in providing technical assistance to communities in working out details of project planning and implementation. There is also the classical deliberative democratic dilemma of the extent to which small deliberative forums can instigate change if the broader political system remains bureaucratic and corrupt. Nevertheless, the promotion of communal councils has transformed the barrio from a mere geographic unit to a space where people can acquire political efficacy by taking part in governance.

These three examples are some of the ways in which participatory democracy has been institutionalized in Venezuela. While the term “populism” has been a comfortable catchword to summarize the country’s democratic trajectory, I suggest that it is more analytically productive to foreground the participatory dimension of these developments to better understand Chavismo’s popular appeal. There is also reasonable empirical evidence to argue that these participatory structures have a strong deliberative component. Discussion and contestation of views have been central to the operation of communal councils and PSUV, which provide historically marginalized citizens the opportunity to shape the conduct and outcome of political processes.
Polarized Democracy

As political participation broadened the scope of politics to traditionally marginalized groups, the regime’s relationship with the opposition became increasingly polarized. The opposition, mostly composed of the same organizations that supported the 1958 pact, refused to accept the regime’s legitimacy and resorted to political tactics that undermined the government, partly because of AD and Copei’s electoral weakness. Both parties, even in elections where they supported common candidates, were unable to win enough seats to make an impact in the parliamentary arena. This exposes a tension between participatory and representative democracy—as the party that promotes participation among ordinary citizens consistently wins broad majority, the discourse of political opposition is pushed to the margins of parliamentary debates.

As a consequence, the opposition utilized different extra-parliamentary strategies to exert political influence. This includes boycotting elections and using private media to discredit participatory initiatives. For example, Bolivarian Circles—which are small groups of eight to ten people meeting frequently to discuss the constitution and teachings of Simon Bolivar—have been depicted as violent and criminal. Elite residents in Caracas were encouraged to form a “Community Plan for Defensive Action” as household helpers engaged in these Circles may have been “manipulated” to see the elites as “enemies” that must be exterminated as part of the “socialist revolution.” Such discourse created a culture of suspicion among fellow citizens and further drove a wedge along class lines.

Strikes and economic shutdowns have also been common tactics to force the government either into an election or to concede to some of their demands. One of the most costly shutdowns happened in 2002 when the management forcibly shut down the state-owned oil and natural gas company (PDVSA) to force Chavez to call for presidential elections. This coincided with a general strike organized by FEDECAMARAS, resulting to the crippling of oil production and revenue losses of at least $7 billion. Chavez—using his adversarial rhetorical style—responded in an equally hostile manner, firing the proponents of the shutdown in public television and turning over the hydrocarbon industry to his trusted military generals. It has also been reported that the energy minister explicitly told PDVSA workers that as public sector employees, they should all support the revolution or they would be sacked. These intense contestations reached their peak in 2002 when a civil-military coup was launched to forcibly oust Chavez, although this has been immediately averted as the Bolivarian Circles mobilized in front of the Miraflores Palace demanding Chavez’s return.
This 48-hour coup underscored the opposition’s determination to undermine the emerging political arrangements.

The wave of protests in the early part of 2014 can be interpreted as a continuation of these tensions. Although the protests were sparked by demonstrations against criminality and impunity, these demonstrations have also become the litmus test for how Venezuela copes with deep disagreements without the leadership of Hugo Chavez. As of March 2014, 36 people had been killed in these demonstrations although the perpetrators of violence have yet to be identified and arrested. Chavez’s successor, Nicolas Maduro continues to blame the opposition for economic sabotage, which caused unprecedented rates of inflation and refuses to engage in dialogue as long as protesters do not evacuate the streets. Supporters of the regime have also shown their force through counter-mobilizations, sometimes ending up in violent confrontation with opposition protesters.

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Venezuela’s democratization story illustrates the importance and limitations of participatory democracy in a country that has traditionally been ruled through inter-elite consensus. There are several lessons to be learned from this narrative that informs current debates in democratic theory and practice.

First, promoting political participation among marginalized groups needs to be linked to public deliberation. The participatory legacy of the Chavez regime was limited to bringing traditionally excluded citizens to the center of governance. While this is a major accomplishment in enhancing the inclusiveness of Venezuelan democracy, this project is incomplete without building the political system’s deliberative capacity to work out disagreements among competing interests (see Dryzek 2009). Deliberation is important in democratic transitions because it creates habits of debate and dialogue among unlike-minded groups. It forges the terms of engagement and cultivates communicative norms that govern the process of conflict resolution and decision-making (Curato 2014). This is the reason why some post-authoritarian countries such as Chile and Poland have invested time, resources, and political capital in convening roundtable discussions among previously antagonistic parties (military generals and human rights victims in the case of Chile; Communist leaders and Solidarity activists in the case of Poland). The idea is to create spaces to level off and develop discursive relationships with the “Other” in order to generate workable agreements—though
not necessarily consensus on issues of principles and values—that become the bases for subsequent deliberations to take place.

The major political crises that occurred in Venezuela in the past decade are products of a political system that failed to create such spaces among antagonistic groups. This is one of the disadvantages of using the language of the “revolution” when institutionalizing participation as it is used to legitimize the exclusion of political opposition who are perceived to derail the revolutionary project. One can judge the Chavez regime’s strategy of “including people” but “excluding the elite” for the sake of the revolution as not much different from the pacted democracy’s strategy of working on an inter-elite consensus but excluding the oppositional civil society by invoking the goal of “political stability.” Both strategies have institutionalized group polarization, which creates barriers for uncovering shared interests and finding the scope for reasonable engagement. For the past 50 years, intense polarization has been the consistent feature of Venezuelan politics.

Second, without deliberation, the gains of participatory democracy are severely compromised. The absence of credible avenues for the opposition to engage within the parameters of parliamentary and participatory democracy makes “uncivil action” appealing political strategies. The danger here, as the case of Venezuela illustrates, is how easy political stalemates can deteriorate to the routinization of uncivil action. This prompts a crisis of participatory democracy where the political system is unable to translate democratic deepening in the grassroots and community movements to the deepening of discursive engagement with the opposition. These two projects are closely connected. Without creating avenues for opposing parties to treat each other as interlocutors to be convinced instead of enemies to be eradicated, participatory democracy in Venezuela can end up as what Mouffe (2000) calls antagonistic democracy. This has become the disturbing trend for Venezuelan politics since the early 2000s, where the winner-takes-all discourse has served to limit the public imagination to work out disagreements. Strikes that aim to paralyze the economy and military coups that forcibly throw a democratically elected government are forms of political action that obliterate the possibility of reasonable engagement.

Third, the current political impasse makes a stronger case for the need to convene deliberative forums in Venezuela to move forward and rebuild its democratic credentials. Venezuela suffers from deep wounds from the military-led massacre in the 1992 riots and, today, from the violent killings of both government and anti-government protesters. The recent protests, however, provide an opening for dialogue and deliberation as most
Venezuelans agree on the need to address the worsening security situation in the country. Such shared concern could instigate public deliberation on the practicalities of addressing this issue, and, in the process, develop deliberative habits that can manage subsequent conflicts.

Finally, the Venezuelan case exposes the kinds of crises citizens face today. There has been a drive towards greater participation among traditionally marginalized groups, as in the recent cases of Thailand, Brazil and Egypt, among others. While aggressive or violent political action appears to be the peak of democratic crises, there is evidence to suggest that the bigger crises lies in competing parties’ inability, and sometimes outright refusal, to generate workable consensus amidst deep disagreements. While an unjust world needs protesters and activists who can confront power, there is also a need for deliberative agents who can build capacities of democratizing polities to handle conflicts based on reason and collective reflection.

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