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The House the Chavez Built

by Joshua Tucker on March 6, 2013 · [0 comments](#)

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The following is a guest post from political scientist [Jennifer Cyr](#) of the [University of Arizona](#) on the implications of the [death of Hugo Chavez](#). We join her in thanking 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 [survey](#) data available.

It happened. After years of illness, months of speculation, and weeks without a clearly and constitutionally defined leader, Hugo Chávez died, rather suddenly, on a Tuesday afternoon in Caracas, Venezuela. Chávez would have served as president of the country for twenty years. As it stands he had fourteen years to revolutionize his country, changing Venezuela's constitution, its institutions, and even its name. Given his importance for the country, it may be appealing to treat his death as a shock to the country's system – a critical juncture after which seemingly minor decisions may impact the country's trajectory for years to come. Rather than give in to this temptation, I believe that what awaits Venezuela is much of the same.

The changes instituted with the adoption of Chávez's 1999 Constitution are, for the most part, well-known. He eliminated the upper house of Congress and changed the electoral rules to strongly favor his (currently predominant) party through the combined effects of malapportionment and a first-past-the-post system. He replaced most of the judiciary with "friendly" judges, and he endowed the national executive with the capacity to reduce the powers of subnational (i.e. state and municipal) authorities. The state bureaucracy has been filled with his supporters, and the country's oil industry has been purged of any pre-Chávez technocrats. Chávez's footprint is large and deep when it comes to the country's institutional framework.

His social impact has been just as impressive. While in office, Chávez instituted a vast array of social programs – executive-led *misiones bolivarianas* – that have sought to promote, to various degrees, improvements in education, health, [nutrition](#), and even culture and security. Incredibly popular but also incredibly costly, these programs will not easily be undone. Even Chávez's main competitor in the 2012 presidential election, Henrique Capriles Radonski, promised to maintain the missions. (He also vowed to improve them by making them more democratic and transparent.)

Internationally, Chávez sought to change the balance of power in the region. He used revenues from the country's vast oil reserves to provide billions of dollars in assistance and subsidies to his allies in the region, including in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. He regularly spoke out on the international stage against the "empire" to the North, working to build an alliance of regional partners that could counterbalance the long shadow of the United States. Chávez's foreign policy had both material and symbolic effects. Because of this, his departure will undoubtedly represent a major blow for the more radical left in Latin America. Many governments, especially in Cuba and in parts of the Caribbean, had come to rely heavily on his large investments in energy and infrastructure. Still, the symbolic importance of his promotion of an alternative vision for hemispheric relations cannot be overstated. His candor and decidedly undiplomatic stance vis-à-vis the United States resonated with many people, both within and outside of Venezuela.

Indeed, Chávez was successful at giving voice to many of those who felt excluded in Venezuela's former (pre-1998) political system. He appealed directly to the poor, emphasizing a message of social justice. He combined his populism with social policies that actually retained (or at least did not reverse) positive trends in illiteracy and poverty reduction. Many Venezuelans today assert that they have easier and better access to [health care](#) and education. During the months I spent in Venezuela, I spoke with citizens who were passionately for but also passionately *against* Chávez. Many on both sides recognized his role in extending important social programs to the poor.

In turn, these Venezuelans were mobilized into a solid and stable group of government supporters. Lest there is any doubt, one need only look at the recent polls undertaken by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University. Between 2006 and 2012, the combined percentage of Venezuelans who rated the president's performance as either "good" or "regular" (that is, neither good nor bad) in any given year hovered around or above 70%. Positive evaluations ranged between 28% and almost 50% during the same time period (Source: The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), [www.LapopSurveys.org](#)). In four presidential elections (1998, 2000, 2006, 2012), Chávez never received less than 55% of the vote. A majority of Venezuelans voted for him each time, despite growing problems in the areas of infrastructure, crime, and macro- and microeconomic stability.

And what of his opposition? Efforts to remove him from office have, in the past, been both unconstitutional and constitutional. More recently, the anti-Chávez camp has worked to organize the myriad political parties, large and small and old and new, into a unified institution. Formed in 2008, the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD) became increasingly savvy in its goal to mount a coordinated campaign to challenge Chávez at the polls. Capriles represents the MUD's most successful endeavor thus far. The opposition candidate gave Chávez a run for his money in the 2012 presidential election, losing to the incumbent by just over 10%.

To be sure, this most recent election represented the president's most closely fought contest. But it also revealed the limitations of an opposition project that was (and for now still is) united exclusively by its anti-*chavismo*. The constellation of parties that makes up the MUD covers the ideological gamut, and many of these are electorally strong only in the states where they were founded. Of the two opposition parties that have a nation-wide presence, one of these – *Accion Democratica* (AD) – is inextricably linked to the pre-Chávez era of two-party, exclusive, and corrupt rule. With Chávez around, these parties had achieved an organizational and institutional unity that might have been sufficient to topple him at the polling booth. Now it is likely that ideological differences, personal ambitions, and unsavory links with the past will become manifest, chipping away at the unity that had made Capriles an attractive alternative for many Venezuelans.

The future of the anti-*chavista* camp is, therefore, in doubt. The *chavistas*, on the other hand, could remain a political and social *tour de force* in the country for some time. After fourteen years in office, Chávez leaves behind an institutional, social, and international legacy that will be difficult to overcome. Perhaps just as important, his memory will surely live on among those Venezuelans who fell under his spell, declaring that they *love* Hugo Chávez ("*yo lo amo*"). Whether his closest confidants can continue to fuel that love after his death is an open question. (His refusal to cultivate any sort of progeny to succeed him, as well as potentially conflicting interests within Chavez's coalition of support, help very little in this endeavor.) Still, given the institutional, political, and social cards stacked in his favor, it seems likely that Chávez's impact on Venezuela will loom large, and for a long time, after his death. The house that Chávez built is, for now, quite strong.

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