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Problems May Convert Believers into Non-Believers in Chávez's Venezuela¹

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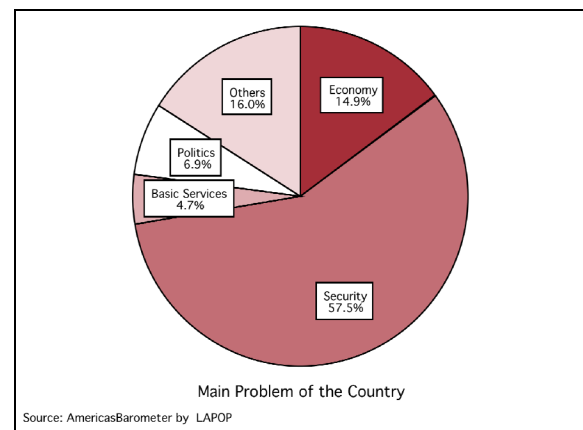
In 1999 Hugo Chávez became president of Venezuela, giving hope to many citizens by promising social, economic, and political improvements and embarking on an expansive implementation of socialist policies. Over ten years later, those policies have been met with mixed success, and the country is plagued by crime and economic problems, especially high inflation.² This *Insights* report shows that negative assessments of crime and the economy by Chávez supporters serve to reduce their approval of his performance as president.

Although Chávez has experienced impressive and enduring support from a large number of

Venezuelan citizens, as shown by repeated victories at the polls, in recent years he has experienced notable defeats, in particular in a December 2007 referendum and the November 2008 regional elections.³ These events in particular have led many to question whether Chávez's popularity is waning, and if so, why.

One explanation offered by the media and supported by academic theory is that performance failures, in the form of Venezuela's alarming crime rates and economic struggles, are taking a toll on Chávez's support. To assess this explanation, this *Insights* report analyzes the relationships between perceptions of crime and economic well-being and approval of Chávez's performance as president, *among those who previously voted for Chávez*.⁴ If poor assessments of Chávez's performance are negatively associated with job approval ratings among his supporters, we have a key to understanding his electoral vulnerability, and a possible explanation for recent defeats at the polls.

Figure 1. Chávez supporters' perceptions of the most important problem in Venezuela, 2008



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¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

² See for example various articles in the www.washingtonpost.com and www.nytimes.com.

³ In December 2007, voters rejected Chávez's proposed constitutional amendment, which included a provision to eliminate term limits. In November 2008, although pro-Chávez candidates won 17 out of the 22 governor elections, the opposition won some of the most important and populous regions of the country (Romero 2008). As noted in the conclusion of this report, however, those electoral defeats were reversed in a February 2009 referendum.

⁴ In a larger project, I include non-supporters in the analysis.

The data for this report are from the 2008 AmericasBarometer survey conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in Venezuela. The data first show that, in fact, Chávez supporters perceive crime and the economy as their most important concerns.⁵

The survey's 1,500 respondents were asked this question:

A4. To begin with, in your opinion, what is the most serious problem faced by the country?⁶

Figure 1 displays the percentage of Chávez's supporters who indicated security (crime), the economy, basic services, politics, or other concerns as the most important problem.⁷ As the figure shows, crime in particular and also the economy to a lesser extent are the two single most important concerns among Chávez supporters. In the next section, I draw on existing scholarship to argue that negative assessments of crime and the economy translate into lower approval of Chávez, even among those who helped elect him to office.

Performance Assessments and Presidential Approval

Scholars have long argued and demonstrated that citizens will reward or punish an incumbent administration based on their perception of its performance (Downs 1957; Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). Concerning economic performance, specifically, a long line of scholarship posits

citizens' support for incumbents declines when economic conditions deteriorate (Lewis-Beck 1986; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Mueller 1973; Kernell 1978; Monroe 1978; Hibbs et al. 1982). Performance assessments affecting incumbent support are not limited to the economy; in fact, other studies have shown that other factors, such as scandals, wars, and overall satisfaction with the performance of democracy also affect voting and presidential approval (MacKuen 1983; Anderson et al. 2003; Brace and Hinckley 1991).

Recently, scholars have shown that salient issues have the greatest effects on incumbent support (Edwards et al. 1995; Fournier et al. 2003). Given the relative salience of security and economic concerns in Venezuela for Chávez supporters, as shown in Figure 1, we would expect to find a strong link between assessments of performance in these areas and Chávez's job approval ratings.

Scholarship documents a link between crime and the economy, on the one hand, and attitudes toward government and democracy in Venezuela. Specifically, Seligson and Boidi (2008) show how crime victimization and perceptions of insecurity reduce the legitimacy of government, interpersonal trust, and support for a stable democracy. Additionally, their research provides evidence that perceptions of how well the government handles economic problems also affect the legitimacy of democratic institutions. On a related note, Hawkins (2010) explains how widespread corruption and economic struggles facilitated the rise of Chávez's populism as a response to the failure of previous democratic regimes to deliver effective governance (Hawkins 2010).

Given that those most likely to suffer crime victimization (the poor) and those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups are thought to be key supporters of Chávez's protracted tenure in office (Canache 2004; Roberts 2003; Handelman 2000; Cannon 2008; Heath 2009; Hellinger 2003, 2005; but see Lupu 2010), it is not surprising, then, to find that security and

⁵ In this report, "Chávez supporters" are those 643 respondents of the AmericasBarometer 2008 Venezuelan survey who said they voted for Chávez. "Non-supporters" are those who said they voted for another candidate.

⁶ Among Chávez supporters, non-response for this question was 0.9 percent.

⁷ Funding for the 2008 AmericasBarometer round was mainly provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Other important sources of support were the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

economic concerns top their lists of the country's most important problems. If classical theories and extant evidence are correct, we should, moreover, find that assessments of negative performance in these areas by Chávez voters are linked to lower levels of job approval for the president.

Determinants of Supporters' Job Approval of President Chávez

Do negative perceptions of crime and economic well-being hurt supporters' job approval of Chávez? To examine this question, I make use of the following survey item measuring presidential job approval:

M1. Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President Hugo Chávez?

Respondents placed their opinion on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 means "very bad," 2 "bad," 3 "fair," 4 "good," and 5 "very good." These responses were recalibrated on a 0-100 scale in order to facilitate comparisons.⁸

To limit the analysis to Chávez supporters, I confine the analysis only to those who reported having voted for Chávez in the last presidential election.⁹ On average, Chávez supporters gave the President a job approval rating of 69.5. A histogram in Appendix A shows this value in comparison to the 2007 and 2010 surveys; data reveal a modest but steady decrease in Chávez's approval among supporters over time.¹⁰ As the

histogram in Appendix B shows, while only a small group of Chávez supporters give him the most negative evaluations, just over 30 percent give him a fair rating, neither bad nor good.

Two variables provide measures of crime performance: crime victimization and perceptions of insecurity. Likewise, two measures capture economic performance: perceptions of personal and economic conditions. Crime victimization is a dichotomous variable, while perceptions of economic conditions range from "very good" to "very bad," and perceptions of insecurity range from feeling "very safe" to "very unsafe."¹¹ Among Chávez supporters, nearly 22% viewed national economic conditions as poor or very poor, while 14% thought their own personal economic situation was bad or very bad. Only 15% of respondents said they felt very unsafe in their neighborhoods, but 24% said that they felt somewhat unsafe.

In light of the important number of Chávez supporters who have negative perceptions of crime and economic well-being in Venezuela, meaningful results could be obtained by studying if and how much these negative perceptions hurt supporters' job approval of Chávez. The following analysis also includes standard socio-economic and demographic variables as controls: age (in years), gender, years of education, and wealth.

Chávez), Chávez received mean approval scores in 2007, 2008, and 2010 of 27.2, 24.3, and 24.9, respectively, suggesting that over these three years his approval among non-supporters remained low and fairly steady (due to the relatively small number of observations, the decrease from 2007 to 2008 is not statistically significant).

¹¹ These variables were also recalibrated from 0-100. The wording of the questions used is as follows: **VIC1.** *Have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months?*; **AOJ11A.** *Speaking of the neighborhood where you live, and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?*; **SOCT1.** *How would you describe the country's economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad?*; **IDIO1.** *How would you describe your overall economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad?*

⁸ Non-response was 1.2 percent for Chávez supporters.

⁹ **VB3.** *Who did you vote for in the last presidential election?*

¹⁰ As Appendix A shows, the AmericasBarometer surveys from 2007, 2008, and 2010 reveal a steady decrease in approval of Chávez among his supporters. In 2007, supporters gave Chávez an average job approval rating of 71.5; while this number only dropped by two units, to 69.5, in 2008, that difference is statistically significant at the 0.10 level. Further, in 2010, supporters gave Chávez an average job approval rating of 65.8, in this case almost four units lower than 2008 (and statistically significant at the .05 level). In terms of non-supporters (those who voted but not for

Figure 2. Determinants of Chávez's Job Approval, among Supporters, 2008

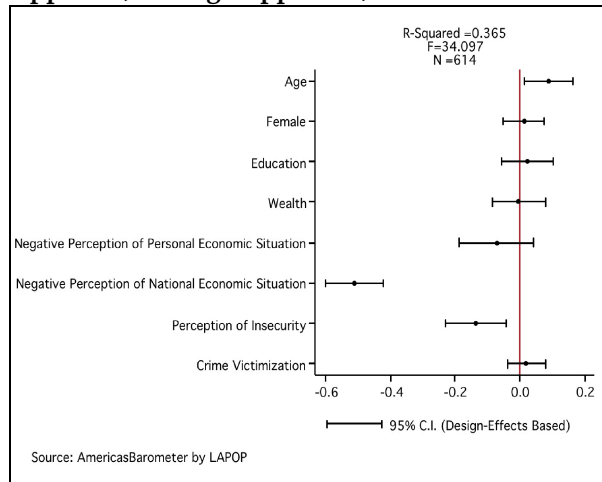


Figure 2 displays the results of the OLS multivariate analysis.¹² The figure displays regression coefficients with dots, which if to the left imply a negative relationship with the dependent variable and the reverse if to the right; statistical significance is indicated by horizontal bars that do not overlap the vertical line at 0. The analysis supports the argument that negative perceptions of crime and economic well-being hurt supporters' approval of Chávez's job as President. All other variables constant, an increase in negative perceptions of security is associated with a decrease in approval of Chávez among his supporters. The same is true for negative perceptions of the country's economic situation. Being a victim of a crime and an increase in negative perceptions of personal economic conditions both are not significant.¹³ Wealth, education, and gender also do not have significant effects, while age has a positive and significant effect on presidential approval, meaning that among Chávez supporters, those who are older express higher

levels of approval of Chávez's performance than those who are younger.

Substantively, negative perceptions of the national economic situation have the largest effect on presidential approval for Chávez among his supporters, followed by perceptions of personal insecurity. This finding means that perceptions of national economic conditions are more important than perceptions of personal economic conditions for determining supporters' degree of approval for Chávez's job as president. This is an interesting finding in light of the fact that, while both are important, personal security concerns trump personal economic concerns among his supporters (see Figure 1). The results also demonstrate that feelings of insecurity rather than being an actual victim of crime have a greater influence on how supporters feel about Chávez. These results are consistent with evidence from both the economic voting and presidential literature, which show how sociotropic perceptions (those relating to the individual's community) matter more than egotropic perceptions (those relating to the individual) in determining incumbent support.

Conclusions

The findings in this report indicate that, indeed, Venezuela's high crime rates and deteriorating economic conditions are taking a toll on Chávez's popularity among his supporters. Lack of effectiveness by the Chávez administration in the face of growing crime rates and worsening economic conditions are a threat to the President's popularity among his supporters.

So long as problems with crime and the economy continue to worsen, Chávez's support is likely to decay. In particular, this report shows that persistent or even increased personal insecurity and negative perceptions of the national economy among his supporters are likely to increase dissatisfaction with the

¹² All statistical analyses reported in this article were conducted using Stata v10, and they are adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample design.

¹³ The correlation between crime victimization and feelings of insecurity is weak at 0.18. The correlation between perceptions of personal and national economic conditions is moderate at 0.56.

President's performance, and possibly translate into electoral defections.

These conclusions notwithstanding, at the time the data were collected for this study, despite the electoral setbacks mentioned at the start of this report, Chávez remained quite popular.¹⁴ In early 2009 Chávez won a referendum that, among other constitutional reforms, eliminated presidential term limits. Consequently, it is clear that regardless of the negative effect that feelings of insecurity and economic hardship can have on his popularity, Chávez continues to retain strong support from his followers.

Nevertheless, the findings in this report reveal fragilities in Chávez's regime in the face of continued public insecurity and economic problems. Even for a unique and popular leader like Chávez, after years of governance and institutional reforms, the same mechanisms that have led voters time and time again to cast out "rascals" responsible for poor performance in established democracies appear capable of undermining Chávez's grip on government, by making non-believers out of once-believers.

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¹⁴ On average respondents of the 2008 Venezuelan survey gave Chávez a job approval rating of 53.1. Supporters gave the President an average job rating of 69.5.

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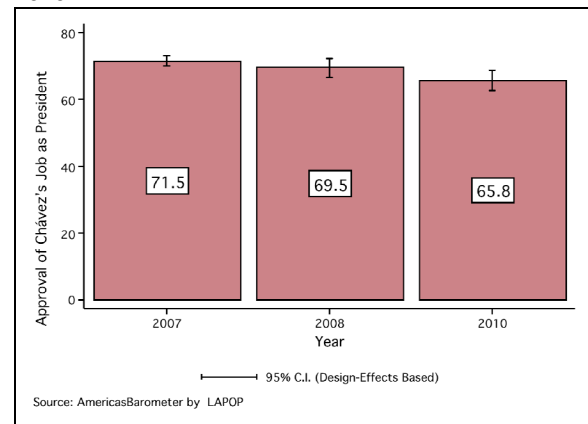
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Appendices

Appendix A: Average Presidential Approval Scores for Chávez among Supporters, 2007-2010



Appendix B: Distribution of Presidential Approval Ratings among Chávez Supporters

