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Venezuela's Escalating Protests, Violence, and Political Instability: The Legacy of Chávez

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Over the last three weeks, Venezuela has found itself engulfed in protests against current President Nicolás Maduro's administration. While the student movement has spearheaded this uprising, many Venezuelans have taken to the streets to voice their grievances against the country's high levels of violent crime, high inflation rates, and the increasing scarcity of basic goods. As protests and violence continue, Hugo Chávez's hand-picked successor faces potentially destabilizing levels of political violence in an era in which protests in other parts of the world (e.g., Ukraine, the Middle East) recently have shown the power of the street. Almost a year after Hugo Chávez's death and Maduro's election, were such high levels of political unrest foreseeable? A brief look at what we refer to as Chávez's "political culture legacy" suggests that, in the absence of Chávez-like charismatic leadership and under the weight of the social and economic problems noted above, political instability was a likely outcome.¹

To understand the nature of democratic attitudes under the Chávez regime and how they might help us understand the political instability in the country today, this *Topical Brief* analyzes survey data from the AmericasBarometer in Venezuela between 2007

and 2012.² As in previous AmericasBarometer studies, we examine two attitudinal dimensions essential to democratic stability: *political legitimacy* (or system support) and *political tolerance*.

Combining a society's level of support for the political system and its willingness to tolerate opposition to that system provides us a more general assessment of the type of political environment that such political attitudes are likely to engender (Seligson 2000; Booth and Seligson 2009; see also previous AmericasBarometer Reports). For example, in a country in which citizens express high levels of support for their political system and high levels of political tolerance, we can expect this political culture to be conducive to the emergence of a stable democratic system of government. Conversely, in a country where citizens neither support the political system nor tolerate those with different political views, the attitudinal landscape will likely not support a stable democracy but rather be more conducive to democratic breakdown.

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

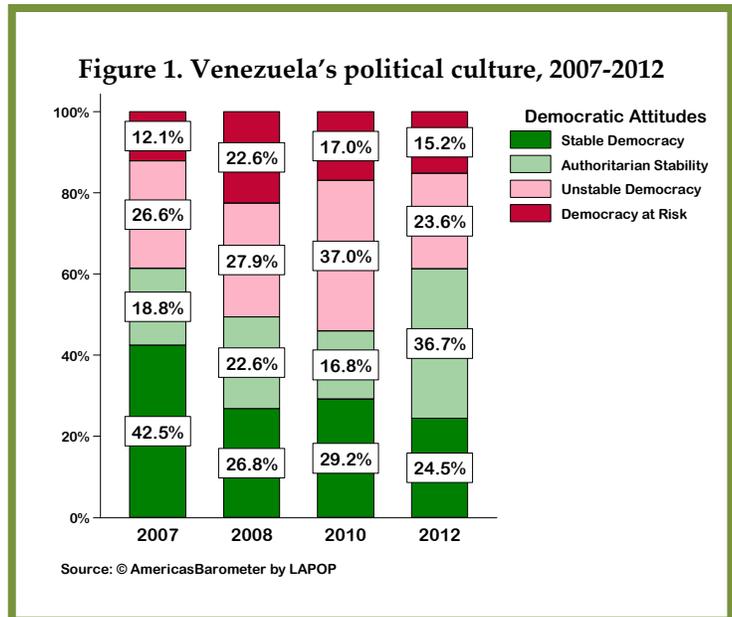
² Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. This *Topical Brief* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

With this theoretical framework then, we can posit four possible political system outcomes as most likely to emerge from the combination of these two attitudinal dimensions: (1) *Stable democracy* (high system support, high political tolerance), (2) *Authoritarian stability* (high system support, low political tolerance), (3) *Unstable democracy* (low system support, high political tolerance), and (4) *Democracy at risk* (low system support, low political tolerance) (Seligson 2000; Booth and Seligson 2009). Working from this well-established theoretical framework, we examine the changes that took place in Venezuelan political culture during the Chávez era that can help us understand the ongoing political upheaval in Venezuela and what the future may hold for Venezuelan democracy.

Figure 1 displays the profiles of Venezuela's political culture from 2007 to 2012, capturing the evolution of the theorized political system outcomes based on the combination of citizens' levels of system support and tolerance through the second half of Chávez's 14 years in power. System support is measured using a standard index of system support questions often employed by AmericasBarometer studies that ask about respondents' perceptions of the legitimacy of key political institutions.³ Similarly, political tolerance is measured using another standard index of AmericasBarometer studies that includes four items designed to capture the degree to which citizens are willing to allow critics of the political system to have the same political rights and freedoms as supporters of the system.⁴

³ The system support items used are as follows: **B1.** To what extent do you think the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? **B2.** To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? **B3.** To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)? **B4.** To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)? **B6.** To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)?

⁴ The items included in the political tolerance index are as follows: **D1.** There are people who only say bad things about the (country) form of government, not just the incumbent government but the system of government.



Both indices are converted to a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 signifies the lowest level of system support or political tolerance, and 100 the highest. Respondents are then divided by whether they score "high" (50 or above on levels of system support or political tolerance) or "low" (below 50) on each index. The distribution of respondents across the possible outcomes of the combination of these two attitudinal dimensions is then derived by calculating the percentage of Venezuelan respondents with attitudes conducive to stable democracy, authoritarian stability, unstable democracy, and democracy at risk.

Figure 1 shows that by the time Chávez began preparing for his fourth reelection in 2012, a fundamental shift in Venezuela's political culture had occurred. Whereas in 2007 over 40% of Venezuelans had expressed attitudes conducive to democratic stability, by 2012 the largest of the four categories was of those

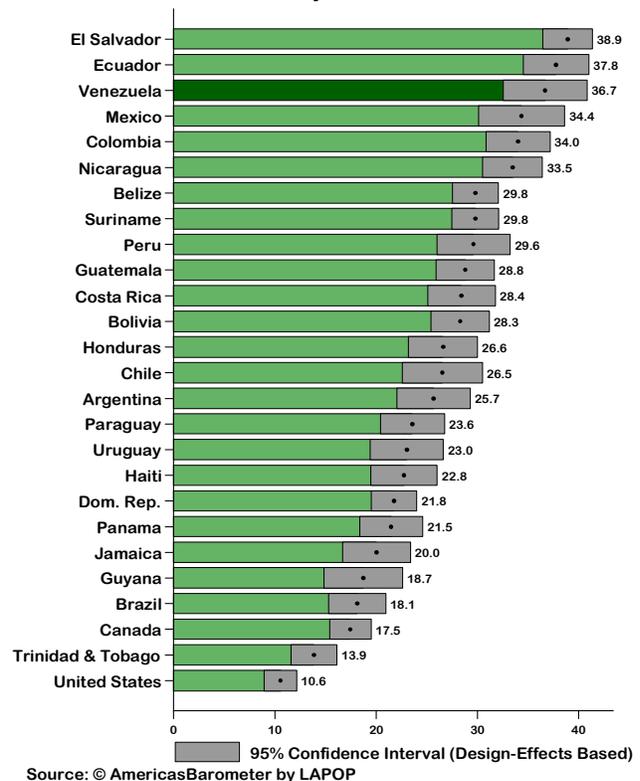
How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote? **D2.** How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? **D3.** Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the (country) form of government, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office? **D4.** How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches?

supportive of authoritarian stability. That is, in 2012, the Venezuelan political system was dominated by the combination of high levels of system support and low levels of political tolerance, indicating that when Chávez died in early 2013, Venezuela had a political climate in which the regime was stable but democratic rule was threatened by a tendency to reject the political rights of critics of the political system.

Evidence of how powerful this Chávez-inspired political culture had become emerges in Figure 2, in which Venezuela ranks as one of the countries across the Americas most characterized by conditions of authoritarian stability in 2012. In that year, only El Salvador and Ecuador ranked higher than Venezuela in terms of the percentage of citizens falling into the “authoritarian stability” category.

This attitudinal profile of strong system support and intolerance in 2012 is not all that surprising considering it evolved in the context of an approaching presidential election in which the stakes were higher than in any other election since Chávez came to power in 1998. Not only did Chávez face his most competitive opponent to date in Henrique Capriles, but a widely publicized battle with cancer gave the president a sympathy element that further facilitated his ability to use his powerful personality and charisma as a means to link himself with the larger political system. By this time, support for Chávez translated strongly into support for the system. According to the 2012 AmericasBarometer, Venezuelan respondents that intended to vote for Chávez expressed an average system support score of 72 on a 0 to 100 scale (100 signifying the strongest support), while those intending to vote for another candidate or vote blank recorded an average system support score of 38 (See Appendix 1). Chávez and the electoral campaign of 2012 exploited this *Chavista* sentiment with the message that casting a vote for Chávez represented both a vote for the continuation of the Bolivarian Revolution project and a show of solidarity with Chávez himself.

Figure 2. Countries across the Americas with a political culture conducive to authoritarian stability in 2012



Employing his trademark bellicose language against the opposition, Chávez led a campaign that depicted the 2012 elections as a zero-sum game in which the true will of the Venezuelan people and the future of the Bolivarian Revolution had to be defended at all costs from the oligarchic political elite of the past. For *Chavistas*, eagerness to stand by the president in the 2012 elections intensified in the face of a growing opposition movement that, under the skillful and charismatic leadership of Capriles, had overcome numerous unsuccessful attempts at becoming a credible electoral threat for Chávez. Framing its campaign as a fight for Venezuela, the opposition pitted their campaign against what they deemed a failed government by highlighting citizen discontent with Venezuela’s increasingly poor economic performance, the country’s rising violent crime rates, and growing government corruption.

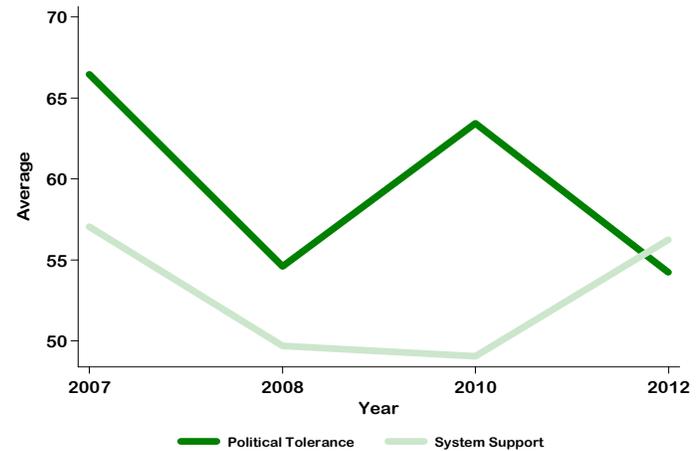
Indeed, the combative political climate and polarization between *Chavistas* and opposition supporters that dominated Venezuelan politics during the Chávez regime was more palpable than ever in 2012. The consequence, as seen in Figure 3, was conditions in which system support, driven mainly by the *Chavista* majority, experienced a strong boost from previous years. Political tolerance, however, declined. Under these conditions Venezuela's political culture during the final days of Chávez displayed all the characteristics supportive of a stable, authoritarian regime.

The strength of this particular combination of attitudes in 2012, then, represents the Chávez political culture legacy. It is a legacy, however, that was intimately tied to the Chávez "cult of personality" he created. With Chávez's death, this legacy of authoritarian stability began to unravel. For even though his hand-picked successor survived one of the most contested elections in Venezuelan history, the recent protests and violence in Venezuela suggest that while political tolerance has declined, the high system support that was so strongly linked to the Chávez's personality is likely to have evaporated – moving the country out of the "authoritarian stability" category into what is arguably an even more troubling category: "democracy at risk." Of course, we will need to examine planned 2014 survey data to determine if indeed this is the case.

Chávez's Legacy and Current Turmoil in Venezuela

There are several lessons from the Venezuela Chávez left behind in 2013 that can help us understand what is going on in the country today. First, Maduro is clearly not Chávez – by all accounts he lacks Chávez's charisma, and, arguably, Chávez's political savvy. Second, the lid on hostile/intolerant conditions between *Chavistas* and opposition supporters that had

Figure 3. Average Levels of System Support and Political Tolerance among Venezuelans, 2007-2012



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

been sustained by high levels of system support now seems to have cracked due to the apparent inefficiency and mismanagement of the Maduro administration (again, we will examine the 2014 survey data to determine whether we can find evidence of this posited evaporation of system support). Third, Chávez's institutional legacy of minority oppression now appears to have been activated by Maduro in an effort to maintain stability, and this has fanned the flames of protest against Maduro's government. All of these factors lead to the conclusion that the country's dominant political culture may well have moved from the "authoritarian stability" category in 2012 to the "democracy at risk" category in early 2014.

It does not take much of a leap of faith to infer that the performance of the Maduro administration has diminished the high levels of system support achieved by Chávez. Venezuela currently faces one of its worst economic crises, in which the Venezuelan currency has been officially devalued twice since Chávez began succumbing to cancer, and inflation rates now stand at over 55%. Venezuela is also experiencing a security crisis, recording one of the highest murder rates in the world in 2013 with more than 24,000

homicides (a rate of about 79 murders per 100,000 people) (AP 2013; Caselli 2014). Moreover, a growing dependency on imports and a shortage of dollars for currency exchange has resulted in punishing conditions of scarcity of basic foods and goods.

On the other hand, levels of political tolerance are also likely to have been affected under Maduro. Intolerance among Venezuelans may have increased as many *Chavistas* have assumed more defensive attitudes in the face of the diminished status of the Bolivarian Revolution in the hands of Maduro. Similarly, opposition leaders have seized on the failings of Maduro and become even more strident in their desires to regain some measure of influence in the Venezuelan political system. These desires have materialized as a call by opposition leaders (and a continued response from their supporters) to use street protests as a means to express their discontent with the performance of the Maduro administration. Yet, the true objective of these protests—whether they seek Maduro’s resignation or a dialogue with the government to jointly seek solutions to the crises confronting Venezuela—remains unclear. And, despite calls from the opposition and the government for peaceful demonstrations, violent confrontations with the police and the Bolivarian National Guard have left more than a dozen dead, 150 injured, and even more detained (Ellsworth and Cawthorne 2014). To add to the instability, clashes between protesters and government security forces continue to garner international attention as widespread media censorship and government repression against protesters have increased.

Democratic stability will reemerge in Venezuela only when all citizens and public officials, including *Chavista* and opposition supporters alike, agree that political institutions are legitimate, while also expressing tolerance of the rights of those who may not share their political views. Considering Chávez’s political culture legacy and the hostile climate between hardline *Chavistas* and angry opposition

protesters that currently saturates political life in Venezuela, it seems that a long and difficult road toward societal reconciliation and the regaining of democratic institutional legitimacy lies ahead for Venezuela.

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Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer - survey and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.

Appendix

