

Realignment of the Party System in Venezuela?

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Prepared for delivery at the 2000 meeting of the Latin
American Studies Association, Hyatt Regency Miami, March 16-18, 2000.

1. Introduction

In line with all poll predictions, former Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez won the December 1998 presidential election in Venezuela with a sweeping majority. His victory marked the end of the traditional two party system dominated by the Social Democrat Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democrat Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI) parties. Seven of the eight presidents elected in Venezuela between 1958 and 1993 had come from the ranks of these two parties (five from AD, two from COPEI). Even though Chávez's predecessor, Rafael Caldera, had won the presidency in 1993 as leader of the Convergencia party, he had founded the COPEI party and represented continuity with the dominant party system in terms of policy, practice and personnel.

The victory of Chávez in 1998 was predicated on the votes of the poorest (and numerically dominant) sectors of Venezuelan society. He offered them the promise of economic reform and redistribution, a message warmly received in a period of severe fiscal crisis. His oil policy emphasized the need to diversify the economic base from dependence on oil revenues. Chávez was also firmly opposed to the privatisation of the state oil company PDVSA. Like the economic proposals, this position was smartly attuned to popular hostility towards privatisation and frustration at the boom-bust cycles of economic growth resulting from Venezuela's status as a mono-exporter. In political terms, the Chávez manifesto embraced radical reform. His proposal for a new constitution was seen as a means to end the institutionalised control of the discredited AD and COPEI parties over all the branches of the Venezuelan state. Chávez successfully wedded populism, nationalism and firm leadership. He represented a clean break from the past, symbolically demonstrated by his much vaunted leadership of the failed coup attempt of February 1992.

Chávez moved quickly to implement his reform proposals. In April 1999 a popular referendum approved the convocation of a constituent assembly. This was duly elected in July. In December, the new constitution was approved in a second referendum. The twenty-sixth constitution introduced profound economic, political and institutional changes to the fabric of the Venezuelan state. To bring the reform process full circle, fresh elections have been called for May 2000. It would appear that the Chávez revolution is relentless. The president enjoys popularity ratings of over 70 per cent. This is despite one of the worst recessions in the contemporary history of Venezuela. In 1999, the economy contracted by 7.2 per cent and unemployment reached a record high of over 18 per cent. It is broadly accepted – even by Chávez himself – that the administration was guilty of neglecting the economy as it focused on constitutional reform throughout 1999. Yet despite this acknowledged disregard and the intense social hardship this caused, Chávez remains phenomenally popular. Electoral statistics would reinforce the impression that this is an unstoppable popular revolution. Chávez won the December 1998 election with the largest majority in Venezuela's democratic history 56.2 per cent. The April referendum was approved by 92.4 per cent. In the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the ruling Polo Patriótico coalition, which groups Chávez's own political party Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and Patria Para Todos (PPT), won 124 of the 131 seats. As a final indication of the mass support for these changes, the constitution was approved by 71.2 per cent in December. Chávez is obviously considered a 'shoo-in' for the May presidential election.

2. Hypothesis

This paper argues that the Chávez revolution is built on dangerously weak ground. Rather than presaging a period of political stability, the future looks ominously bleak. Whilst there are a host of factors which have led the author to this conclusion, space requires that the justification for this position can be built on discussion of only two. Attention is drawn to the reality belying the electoral data. Abstention remained critically high in all elections and referenda held between 1998-99. This means that the election of Chávez did not reverse the chronic delegitimization of politics and political institutions that prefigured his emergence. Over half of the electorate abstained in the December 1998 election, the most intense and critical in Venezuela's democratic history. Support for Chávez is neither as extensive nor all embracing as his actions in government would seem to imply. Secondly, abstention actually increased in the two crucial referenda on constitutional reform. Abstention in the April referendum convoking the constituent assembly totaled 62 per cent. In the July elections to select members for the assembly, 54 per cent of registered voters failed to participate and in the December 1999 referendum for the approval of the new constitution, abstention rose to 56 per cent. This means that profound institutional change has been effected without the expressed support of over half of the Venezuelan electorate, notwithstanding those who have failed to register. The ability of the Chávez government to push through such a far-reaching series of reforms is relative to the apparent (but questionable) strength of his electoral mandate, but more crucially to the absolute weakness of the opposition parties in Venezuela. Constitutional change has been achieved without meaningful debate and in the absence of consensus. This augurs ill for the democratic health of the country.

Beyond the abstention issue, but on an inter-related theme, a second grave weakness in the Chávez revolution is the absence of a coherent party base. Popular support for MVR is limited. This is a revolution dependent on the charisma and authority of one individual – Chávez. Without a consolidated party base, it is difficult to gauge how the Chávez government can consolidate these changes in the long term. This has been an elite led project, pioneered by the president and a select group around him. Any ability to meet the stated aims of deepening democracy will be circumscribed by the primary objectives of the government – retaining power, preventing roll back and permanently eradicating AD and COPEI from the political scene. This can only presage a period of democratic weakening rather than democratic deepening.

3. The AD-COPEI tradition

In his analysis of party systems in First World democracies, Ware points to an incremental process of political reform and change. Dramatic fissures in these party systems is discounted on the basis that parties can respond to demands for modernization and adapt their platforms to changing popular sentiment. Competition therefore drives parties to maintain their relevance. Any failure to do so would lead to their exclusion from the political market.¹ That Venezuela experienced such a sharp rupture in its party system in 1998 underlines the flawed classification of Venezuela as a liberal democracy.² Although the political system outwardly met the procedural requirements of a democratic system, the reality was different. The forty year long electoral dominance of AD and COPEI was not based on their ability to effectively compete in the political market. On the contrary, their hegemony was maintained by their negation of meaningful competition and through the imposition of obstacles to political reform.

During the earliest stages of the post 1958 democratic regime, COPEI, although more specifically AD were genuinely popular. Initially this was because both parties enjoyed a glorified association with the struggle for democracy. They successfully constructed mass, nationally based political organisations and converged on and captured the centre ground of politics. In the absence of mobilised ethnic, religious or class cleavages, their multiclass, *policlasista* appeal was extensive. From this base, they were able to sustain the consensual predisposition of the 1958 Pact of Punto Fijo.³ However, the democratic intentions of the Pact were subverted. The administrative spoils system – designed to ensure all parties maintained a vested interest in the democratic regime – became a locus for corruption and clientelism. The Pact also sought to marginalise political actors or organisations considered a threat to democratic consolidation. But *any* autonomously organised interests were viewed as implicitly destabilising. This led to the creation of a system in which interests could only be articulated through AD, COPEI or their affiliated organisations. Ultimately, the exclusion of any group not linked to the two parties became an end in itself.

The ability of AD and COPEI to delimit political challenges and their determination to do so, was linked to the oil economy. Petrodollars financed the creation of a paternalist state that was wealthy enough to meet the employment, consumption and investment needs of all Venezuelan society. This in turn facilitated the maintenance of the political consensus embedded in the Pact of Punto Fijo. As the brokers between the state and society, AD and COPEI were able to provide jobs, high wages, credit and subsidies to all class. Any competition threatened to arrest their privileged access to the oil revenue and their subjective distributionary capabilities. Competition in this respect should be defined in the broadest possible sense. It relates not only to groups external to AD and COPEI but also factions within the parties. Throughout the 1960s, schisms relating to the ideological direction and presidential candidacies of the two parties were swiftly dealt with by the expulsion of dissident voices.

Purchasing support was not the only method through which AD and COPEI sustained their political hegemony. The electoral system further facilitated their political dominance. Positions open to elective competition were heavily circumscribed. Despite Venezuela's status as a federation in the 1961 constitution, the president usurped the right to appoint state governors and the authority of regional governments was restricted. A closed block list system was adopted for legislative elections. Through one single tick, the Venezuela electorate simultaneously elected a single party to all legislative tiers, ranging from the National Congress to parochial councils. This limited the ability of minor or regional based challenges to compete effectively (the wasted vote scenario) or consolidate power at the local level. Unusually within presidential systems, the legislative and executive elections were run concurrently. The president was elected under a single round, first past the post system. This had the two-fold effect of reducing minor party challengers in the presidential competition (the wasted vote scenario again) whilst concentrating electoral support alternatively in AD or COPEI. This was evident in the much observed 'pendulum' pattern of voting in Venezuelan elections. As if to completely eliminate any hope for nascent political parties, under the Law of Suffrage state funding of political parties was distributed on the basis of previous electoral performance – providing AD and COPEI with a rolling electoral advantage.

The end result of these electoral, economic and institutional variables was the artificial construction of a dominant two party system. In the national elections of 1973, Venezuela shifted from a fragmented multiparty system to a two party system dominated by AD and COPEI. This was maintained through successive elections. From 1973 to 1988, the share of

the presidential and congressional vote between the two leading parties remained above 70 per cent. As if to underline the legitimacy of the new democratic system, electoral participation was high. In all elections held from 1958 until 1978, the abstention level was confined to single digits. Correlating with high levels of participation was evidence of a rapid process of partisan alignment. In 1973, 48.7 per cent of poll respondents claimed to be militants or sympathizers of a political party.⁴

4. The anti-party legacy – abstention and alienation

Expressed electoral support for AD and COPEI and high levels of party militancy led to invalid conclusions about the nature of Venezuelan ‘democracy’, specifically that it was stable, legitimate and consolidated. Opinion poll surveys however demonstrated popular disaffection with AD and COPEI. The two parties were widely seen as unrepresentative, self-serving and corrupt. In an influential survey by Baloyra and Martz in the early 1970s, 70 per cent of respondents believed the only concern of politicians was to win elections and 81 per cent viewed the parties as instruments of ‘powerful minorities’.⁵ These findings correlated with those of Welsch who found that 87 per cent of those interviewed in his 1973 survey believed politicians were dishonest and only 13 per cent believed the parties were democratic.⁶

Political disaffection was masked by the persistently good performance of the economy. During the 1960s, GDP growth averaged 6%. In the early 1970s, the Yom Kippur war led to a precipitous rise in oil prices, fuelling a sharp increase in per capita income from \$1,340 in 1972 to \$2,900 in 1976.⁷ The influx of petrodollars financed a raft of welfare measures, job creation and credit access schemes. Hence the popular judgement that the government acted with relative efficacy in economic policy ameliorated overt discontent with their political practices. The Welsch survey established that 73 per cent had confidence in the political system to resolve national problems in 1973, decreasing slightly to 64 per cent in 1978.⁸ Baloyra and Martz found that the favorable economic situation distorted people’s perceptions of their class location. 57 per cent of respondents identified themselves as middle class despite an incongruity with their socio-economic status.⁹

The efficacy evaluation deteriorated as the economic performance reversed towards the end of the 1970s and as it became pronounced in the 1980s. The chronic mishandling of the oil revenue in conjunction with inadequate macroeconomic policy measures led to a serious contraction of the economy. Rather than reigning in the interventionist state, successive governments borrowed in order to maintain capital outlays.¹⁰ No efforts were made to reduce fiscal dependence on the oil economy. This reflected the extreme reliance of Venezuelan democracy and the party system on the distribution of material reward, pointing to the absence of a normative commitment to the system amongst the Venezuelan population.

Economic crisis led to a precipitous decline in popular support for AD and COPEI. This was reflected in a sustained process of partisan dealignment. Those classifying themselves as ‘independent’ rose from 18 per cent in 1973 to 47 per cent in 1990.¹¹ In August 1995, *El Nacional* reported that 61 per cent of the population claimed to have no party sympathies, identification with AD and COPEI falling to 9 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. Running parallel with decreasing militancy was a gradual decline in electoral participation. The elections of 1978 saw abstention move into double figures for the first time, rising from 3.4 per cent recorded in 1973 to 12.4 per cent. Abstention followed a persistently upward trend thereafter; rising to 18.1 per cent in the presidential elections of 1988.¹² This latter figure was

surpassed in 1993 when abstention reached a record high of 39.8 per cent. The rise in abstention reflected alienation from the political system not contentment with the prevailing party system, the preponderant explanation for abstention in First World democracies. Given the financial and structural constraints on alternative political organizations, the electorate had no alternatives to 'exit' to hence they abstained. This assessment is derived from the statistical evidence of the dealignment process reinforced by opinions expressed in poll surveys.

A survey carried out by the *Instituto Venezolano de Opinión y Mercado* in 1991 found that 91 per cent of respondents believed the parties had little or no credibility.¹³ R. Delgado found that 70 per cent of respondents in his 1992 survey believed parties did not anticipate their concerns and only 25 per cent viewed parties as 'beneficial'. Politicians remained a constant focus of criticism, with 68 per cent of the view that politicians had done little for the country. A further 82 per cent of those surveyed believed that politicians lied.¹⁴ Three years later, a survey by the *Fundación Pensamiento y Acción* found that 75 per cent of respondents were 'very dissatisfied' with the political system.¹⁵ In response to the questions '*Which institutions have performed well?*' and '*In which institutions do you have the most confidence?*' the most basic elements of the political system; Government, Supreme Electoral Council, Congress and the Judiciary received the lowest placement. Underlining the link between abstention and alienation, 31 per cent declared they would not vote because the political system did not work and 44 per cent claimed they did not participate in elections because they were not interested. At the time of the *Fundación Pensamiento y Acción* survey, the national average of economic satisfaction was just 2.7 per cent. Signifying the social linkage between economic well being and perceptions of political legitimacy, 71 per cent supported the view that '*If the economic situation is improved, automatically, the political situation will improve*'. A further instructive finding was that 76 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement '*we will have a richer country when corruption is defeated*', thereby linking the possibility of economic growth to political rather than economic reform.¹⁶

5. *The Failure of Reform*

Somewhat ironically, alienation from the political system increased despite efforts to improve accountability and representation. In 1989, the AD government of Carlos Andrés Pérez introduced a number of reforms including administrative and political decentralisation and changes to the electoral system. These were part of a package of proposals put forward by the Presidential Commission on the Reform of the State, known by the acronym COPRE. In the view of COPRE, the elimination of the closed block list in legislative elections and its replacement by named voting would enhance links between representatives and their constituencies. Complementing this vision of a vibrant civil society was the process of decentralisation. Direct election of state governors and mayors was perceived as a means of increasing participation and legitimacy at the regional level. It was assumed that this would feed in with the electoral reforms to improve the credibility of the entire political system.

The reforms of 1989 significantly failed to meet their stated intention. Disaffection with the political system – as demonstrated by the 1995 survey by the *Fundación Pensamiento y Acción* - was sustained. Rather than reversing, abstention accelerated. In the presidential election of 1993, abstention increased by 21.7 per cent on the figure recorded in 1988. The increase in abstention was over 15 per cent in 21 of the country's 22 states, pointing to a generalized crisis of participation and common, cross-national factors influencing abstention. The increase in abstention was not confined to national level elections. Participation rates

were also low in the elections for regionally based authorities. In the first set of elections for regional executives in 1989, abstention totaled 54.9 per cent. Notwithstanding a slight decrease in 1992, when it fell to 50.7 per cent, the overall trend was one of a persistent decrease in participation, with abstention rising to 53.8 per cent in 1995.¹⁷

Despite the evident failure of the reforms to meet their stated intention, alternative party organisations did benefit from the changes. Decentralisation and named voting to congress provided an opportunity for minor parties to consolidate political control in regions of strength. So for example, La Causa Radical (LCR) and the MAS party were able to win regional executive and legislative office in areas where they had built support at the grass roots level. This was the case in Bolívar state for LCR and in Aragua for MAS. Success in regional elections provided the minor parties with a platform for growth at the national level. Their national level presence was then consolidated by the named voting system as *uninimonalidad* enabled the electorate to split their tickets. Hence votes for minor parties previously perceived as ‘wasted’ were now channelled to LCR and MAS. As a result, the national elections of 1993 marked the return to a multiparty system as minor parties capitalised on declining support for AD and COPEI. LCR and MAS also saw their support levels grow in the presidential election (indirectly through the Convergencia coalition in the case of MAS). As with the results of the congressional election, this led to a fragmentation of competition in the contest for the executive and the displacement of AD and COPEI from the presidency.

Table 1 National Election Results 1993

Candidate	party	presidential vote	congressional vote
R. Caldera	Convergencia / MAS	30.5%	24.4%
C. Fermín	AD	23.6%	28.8%
O. Alvarez	COPEI	22.7%	27.2%
A. Velásquez	LCR	21.9%	19.6%

Source: Consejo Supremo Electoral, Tomo de Elecciones

Overall the intentions of the reforms were subverted. There are a number of factors that account for this development. Firstly, the COPRE proposals were conceived as an organic whole. In their fullest form they embraced not only electoral reform, but also changes to the administration of elections, internal reform of the political parties and changes to campaign financing laws. Pérez only accepted selected parts of the COPRE proposals. AD and COPEI were therefore able to continue with politics ‘in the old way’. The two parties altered their electoral strategies as a response to the changes to the electoral system. In local government, well-known congressional politicians were parachuted into regional seats. In the state governor elections of 1995 sitting congressional representatives were selected as candidates for state governor in all but 6 of the 22 states. This was a negative and highly opportunistic development. The candidacies of ‘notables’ prevented local people from representing their own communities, negating the essence of the COPRE proposals. Decentralization had been viewed as a means of improving participation and representation yet the dynamics of party competition at the regional level ensured that the traditional political class dominated the process. Further narrowing democratic choice was a new intensity of competition. The traditional parties formed alliances in order to limit the challenge of emerging threats such as the LCR. This reduced the number of candidates and electoral options, with small local

groups forced to unite with the dominant parties. Arguably the greatest failure of Pérez was his failure to embrace reform of the electoral administration. This meant that even though AD and COPEI experienced a real decline in their support levels, they were able to maintain a national presence through recourse to electoral corruption.

5.1 *The administration of elections*

Until 1997, the state body responsible for the administration of elections was the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE). The organizational history of the CSE mirrored the trends of clientelism, corruption and bureaucratization in the state and national administration. When the party system acquired its bipolar configuration after 1969, AD and COPEI divided the electoral administration between themselves, building powerful vested interests into the maintenance of the institutional *status quo*. The responsibilities of the CSE included compilation of the electoral register, the creation of voting circuits, the designation of voting tables and voters, ballot design, legalization and funding of parties and controlling propaganda. Thus politicization of the CSE had critical implications for its ability to administer free and fair elections.

The organizational structure of the CSE ran vertically down from the CSE council in Caracas to the state level *juntas electoral principales* (JEPs), then the municipal *juntas electoral municipales* (JEMs), down to council wards, the *juntas parroquiales* (JPs), finally reaching the lowest level, the voting tables or *mesas de votacion*. Under the Organic Law of Suffrage, the *juntas electorales* collectively ‘direct, organize and oversee the electoral process’ under conditions of ‘institutional and functional autonomy’. Despite the appearance of decentralization, the CSE was an intensely centralized body with administrative authority held by the Council in Caracas, the only permanently staffed section.

Composition of each level of the Council was significant. At the head of the CSE was a president and vice president appointed by Congress, with nine additional members located in Caracas. Under Article 39 of the Organic Law of Suffrage, six of the eleven members were required to be ‘independent’. The remaining five were party representatives, distributed on the basis of performance in the previous national election. This guaranteed permanent representation of the dominant parties. The state and municipal *juntas electorales* also combined independent and party representation. At the very bottom of the administrative hierarchy were the voting tables. The *mesas de votacion* were the only section of the electoral administration where party representatives outnumbered independents. Each voting table had five members, three appointed by the three parties with the highest vote in the previous national election. Vote stealing during elections was rife at the *mesas de votacion*. The manual system of voting and the inability of minor parties to send witnesses to cover every voting table facilitated this practice.

The politicization of independent figures within the CSE was common. As independents were selected by congress, party loyalists were appointed, allocated on the basis of a spoils system between AD and COPEI. Public confidence in the real level of independence amongst these executive figures was minimal.¹⁸ AD and COPEI thus had extensive control of the entire institutional infrastructure of the CSE. Technical, legal and statistical information that fed to the top of the system emanated from an intensely politicized administrative hierarchy. Gerrymandering of electoral districts was common, as was the tendency for dead voters to be registered on the REP and vote for AD or COPEI. As Miguel Rodríguez, former Minister of Planning and President of the Central Bank claimed: ‘the electoral system is the system of

AD. AD protects this system making it susceptible to fraud, outright corruption and the stealing of votes.¹⁹

During the period of high systemic legitimacy, the internal operations of the CSE were not subject to critical review. Allegations of electoral fraud escalated following the introduction of electoral reform in 1989. Minor parties maintained that election results failed to reflect their true levels of electoral support. Attention focused on the CSE, which was seen to be acting in the interests of the dominant parties. In 1993, for the first time in the democratic history of Venezuela, the results of the presidential elections were disputed. LCR openly contested the results, rejecting their fourth placement and claiming a 2 per cent margin between the official winning candidate, Rafael Caldera and the LCR candidate, Andrés Velásquez. The events of 1993 followed equally controversial local elections in 1992. Evidence of electoral fraud was condemned by the Supreme Court leading to the partial re-run of the elections for state governor and mayor in a number of areas. In the state governor elections of December 1995, violence marred voting in the states of Lara, Anzoátegui, Zulia and Bolívar, and appeals against the results in the latter two states forced a partial re-run of elections. In conjunction with events in 1992 and 1995, the disputes of 1993 placed a question mark over the legitimacy of elective authorities. The inability of the CSE to administer elections drastically undermined public confidence in the electoral process. A survey by *Latinobarometro* in 1993 found that 72.5 per cent of Venezuelans believed that there was fraud in the electoral system.²⁰ Hence in not pushing through a reform of the electoral administration, any net benefits of the 1989 reforms introduced by Perez were negated.

5.2 The political costs of the 1989 failure

The 1989 reforms exacerbated the existing crisis of the political system. They raised hopes of a meaningful restructuring of the party and political system. These expectations were subsequently frustrated by the behaviour of the political parties. This underlined the inability of the dominant parties to reform the system from within, leaving actors external to the party system as the only hope for change. The changes of 1989 had the additional effect of absorbing challengers to AD and COPEI into a discredited party system. This was particularly damaging for LCR. When the party had existed on the outside of the political mainstream it was able to build support through presenting itself as a cogent alternative to AD and COPEI. Through its involvement in the *Nuevo Sindicalismo* movement and local government politics, LCR was seen to be openly democratic and above the clientelistic and corrupt practices that characterised AD and COPEI. After 1993 LCR rapidly expanded its representation in Congress as a result of the reforms. Their number of deputies rose from the 3 elected in 1988 to 40 in 1993. The movement consequently lost its organisational coherence and its profile as a movement distinct from the established parties. In order to compete effectively at the national level, LCR began to adopt the organisational tendencies of AD and COPEI. A powerful central party elite emerged within the party, which looked to horse trading in Congress to expand its control of legislative commissions. LCR additionally jettisoned its commitment to empowering people at the local level and copied the dominant parties' strategy of running well-known national politicians for local government office. Having acquired a vested interest in the institutional *status quo*, LCR dropped its demands for radical political and constitutional reform. Ultimately it was hard to distinguish LCR from the political mainstream.

The 1989 reforms can be viewed as a conservative process of change in order to keep things the same. The failure of AD and COPEI to implement substantive political reform was all the more condemnable given the overt and ongoing crisis of legitimacy endured by the political system. This was not only evident in declining participation and partisanship but symbolically represented by the *Caracazo* riots of 1989 and the two military coup attempts of 1992. Any expectations of improvement under the Caldera government elected in 1993 were quashed by the fundamental inability of the octogenarian president to grasp the depths of the crisis. Lacking a congressional majority, Caldera relied heavily on support from the AD party in Congress, which in turn acted as an obstacle to progress on the political or economic reform front. Elected on a platform of anti-corruption, democratic and constitutional reform, Caldera disappointed expectations of political modernisation. This was relative to his commitment to the maintenance of the Punto Fijo state and revealed in his economic policy approach. Falling into the traditional trap of inflating public spending during a period of windfall oil revenues, the government vastly increased fiscal outlays in 1997. It was subsequently forced into budget cuts of \$6 billion when oil prices declined in 1998 and in the run up to the most contentious elections in Venezuela's democratic history. In the absence of reform oriented actors emerging from within the party system, the opportunity for change could only come from outside of the political mainstream. However, the extent to which any *extra*-systemic actor could claim to represent the heterogeneous group of majority discontented was questionable.

6. Party System Fragmentation

Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez, one of the leaders of the February 1992 coup attempt, claims that whilst he was imprisoned he was approached by a number of different political groups seeking his endorsement for the 1993 elections. It is obvious why his support was courted. After the events of February, Chávez was popularly viewed as a real champion of political change. Along with his conspiratorial military group, Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano 200 (MBR 200) founded in 1982, he had tried and failed to overturn the illegitimate Punto Fijo state. His custodial sentence transformed him from a military rebel into a martyr for democratic reform. Despite the overtures, Chávez rejected any association with existing political organisations. In his view, the two coup attempts of 1992 were a military failure but they were also a political success, indicating to Venezuelans that a leadership committed to revolutionary reform had emerged.²¹ MBR 200 interpreted abstention as a method of articulating opposition to AD and COPEI. This had the potential to be positively canalised through a radical mass movement for change. From this evaluation MBR 200 adopted an abstentionist stand for the 1993 and 1995 elections. The strategy had its limitations. Whilst the ultimate end was to encourage all voters to withdraw from elections, no timeframe for the demise of the Punto Fijo state could be determined. As a result, in December 1996 the movement voted to participate in the 1998 elections. A new organisation was created for this electoral end, Movimiento Quinta República. MVR was distinct from MBR 200, uniting both military and civilian activists in an organic group.

The timing of MVR's entry into the electoral market was significant. The Venezuelan party system had become increasingly fragmented which worked to the benefit of MVR. The intra-party developments in the run up to the 1998 elections were to have critical implications for the immediate period after the election of Chávez, allowing the new president to move into a vacuum of organised opposition. All significant parties experienced debilitating splits or internal schisms in their efforts to find candidates for the 1998 elections. This reflected the extreme uncertainty over social affiliations and support bases in a period of partisan

dealignment and rising abstention. LCR formerly divided in April 1997. The section of the party linked to Andrés Velásquez retained the name and symbols of the party. In the face of declining political credibility and limited alternatives, the party opted to support the presidential campaign of the independent candidate and long term poll leader Irene Sáez in January 1998. Pablo Medina departed from the LCR rump with a majority of the party's congressional representatives. They established a new organisation called Patria Para Todos. In January 1998 PPT – somewhat hesitantly – decided to unite behind the MVR campaign, sealing an historical relationship between Chávez and leading figures within PPT.

MAS and COPEI also experienced crippling divisions that were both ideological and personal in nature. For MAS, participation in coalition with President Caldera's Convergencia party proved highly debilitating. It revealed historical and unresolved ideological distinctions within the party that emerged forcefully in the election of a new general secretary and party president in 1997. The successful candidates in the internal elections, Leopoldo Puchi and Felipe Mujica, had taken a critical line in congress towards the Caldera government. Allegations by pro-Caldera sections that the internal elections had been rigged belied a deeper crisis over the ideological direction of MAS. The 'socialist' party struggled to find a conceptual redefinition of its aims and objectives in a period of generalised ideological crisis for the left. Further cleavages emanated between MAS leaders in regional politics (who had emerged as a result of the decentralisation process) and the central party leadership.²²

Within COPEI, the cleavages were complex and related to the party's efforts to recuperate after the electoral humiliations of 1993 and 1995. There was a generational antagonism between the 'historical leaders' and a younger section frustrated by the lack of internal reform and leadership rejuvenation. This parlayed into a growing ideological distinction between a more market-oriented faction, and a dwindling minority who remained wedded to the model of state intervention. The Christian Democrats were thus divided on how to approach the 1998 elections. One section linked to former presidential candidate Eduardo Fernández maintained that the party should run with a *Copeyano* candidate, a position opposed by another faction grouped around former president Luís Herrera Campíns. The Herrera Campíns group were prepared to consider electoral alliances with independent actors as a means of restoring political credibility. The Campíns faction prevailed and in May 1998, Irene Sáez was chosen as the party's presidential candidate by 64 per cent of the 1,532 delegates at the party's national convention. The move proved disastrous for Sáez whose support levels rapidly deteriorated. Her association with the discredited COPEI party undermined her image as an innovative and independent figure divorced from the traditional party system. Her decision to run as the COPEI candidate also had implications for LCR which subsequently withdrew its support from her campaign.

AD appeared to be the only united and coherent political force. This was related to the unquestioned authority of the party's long time general secretary Luis Alfaro Ucero. His vice like grip on the party machine and bureaucracy enabled him to purge internal opponents. Those who lingered tempered any reformist intentions. Under the guidance of Ucero, AD was able to reverse the electoral disaster of 1993 and emerge as the strongest party in the 1995 regional elections. As a result, it seemed that the party was well positioned for the elections of December 1998. However, as with the other parties, the issue of the presidential candidate also caused a rupture within AD. In November 1997, the party's 1993 presidential candidate Claudio Fermín left the party when it became clear that Alfaro Ucero would win the candidacy.

7. The Election Changes and Implications of November 1998

The Chávez candidacy benefitted from two critical mistakes by AD and COPEI. These were to attenuate their leverage during his presidential term. The first was the decision taken by the AD/COPEI majority in congress in May 1998 to separate the congressional, state governor and state assembly elections (moved to November) from the presidential elections (which went ahead in December as planned). The move was defended on the grounds that the unusual situation of a mega-election for 3,362 executive and legislative posts was too complicated. It was in fact a cynical manoeuvre, designed to prevent a landslide victory by Chávez. Their concerns over a pro Chávez 'coattails' effect in the state governor and legislative elections was due to his surge in the opinion polls. A poll by *Datánalisis* in that month showed a decline in support for Sáez to 22 per cent with Chávez leapfrogging into first place with 27 per cent. The decision to alter the election date not only eroded public support for AD and COPEI it further helped consolidate the pro-Chávez coalition. A month later the Puchi faction of the MAS joined the MVR campaign, leading to the formation of the Polo Patriótico. This united MVR, PPT, MAS and the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) into a broad based, civil and military movement.

The second major mistake of AD and COPEI emanated from the November 1998 elections. When it became clear that their respective presidential candidates could not prevent a Chávez presidential victory, they were jettisoned, plunging both parties into crisis. Not only did the removal of Sáez and Alfaro Uceró drastically undermine any pretence of internal unity and coherence within AD and COPEI, their subsequent decision to unite behind Henrique Salas Romer, the only real challenger for the presidency, effectively eliminated any hope he had of winning.

The November elections were held under distinct conditions. A series of sweeping changes to the Suffrage Law were introduced in December 1997. They resulted from pressure from domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations, which lobbied the government to curb the influence of political parties in the electoral process to reduce electoral fraud and improving popular confidence.²³ The manual system of voting was ended and replaced by automated voting. The Consejo Supremo Electoral was renamed the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) and party representation on the CNE directorate was prohibited. This attempt to depoliticize elections was somewhat diluted as Congress reserved the right to appoint the seven members.

The neutralization of party influence ran down to the lowest level of the electoral administration. 'Randomly selected' citizens staffed the juntas regionales electorales (JRE) and juntas electorales municipales (JEM). Provisions were made to ensure that at least one lawyer was represented on the JREs and JEMs. Major changes were introduced at the voting tables. The random selection of individuals through a lottery system was introduced. Two of the six table representatives were chosen from a list of local educators, two from a list of students and two from the electoral register. Educational requirements were instituted and those undertaking *servicio electoral obligatorio* had to attend courses run by the Universidad Experimental Simón Rodríguez. A final significant change was the re-introduction of the list system, with voters distributed into 'personalized proportional circuits'. This replaced the 'mixed system' of list and nominal voting which had been used for the election of congress in 1993 and state legislators in 1995. That the presidential victory of an anti-*Punto Fijista* candidate followed reform of the voting system is significant as it underlines the centrality of the administrative variable in the maintenance of dominant party hegemony prior to 1998.

Whilst the reforms to the administration of elections are to be welcomed, it was unfortunate that the changes were introduced with such a brief amount of time remaining before the elections. The newly appointed members of the directorate had a limited amount of time to adjust to their new positions and there were allegations that they lacked experience. The CNE was criticised for its handling of voter registration. When registration opened in April 1998 only 2,500 of the 8,500 registration centers opened on time. As a result, at the close of registration in July 1998, an estimated two million people had missed the deadline. There was additional criticism from the PP that the CNE had limited the number of registration centers in barrio areas and a broader media criticism that the CNE's campaign of voter information was limited.

The changes to the electoral table also created major problems. Each table required six members and a further twelve alternates in case of absence on polling day. Given that the total number of voting tables in the country was 20,000, this required the selection and training of 360,000 people. Administrative delays at the CNE meant that only 233,000 of these table workers received notification from the CNE informing them of their electoral duties.²⁴ The credentials of the remaining 127,000 were not delivered until the actual day of the election. As a result of this bureaucratic incompetence, the high standard of electoral training anticipated by the December reforms did not come to fruition.

7.1 The Election Results

Examining the results of the elections for state governor, the weakness of the MVR party are evident. On paper, the results looked good for the Polo Patriótico coalition, which won control of eight of the twenty-three state governments. However this performance was only possible due to the strong performance of coalition allies, the MAS and PPT parties. Only in Barinas state did MVR win control of the executive without MAS and PPT support. In this case, the candidate was the father of Hugo Chávez, and the MVR benefitted from the natal linkage between Chávez junior and his home state. In Lara and Anzoátegui state, it was the ability of PPT to translate historical support for the LCR into a victory for the PPT candidate. This was also the case in Zulia, where Arias Cárdenas retained the state governorship with the support of an LCR, MVR and COPEI alliance. Similarly in Aragua, Lara and Portuguesa, it was support for MAS candidates standing on the alliance platform that translated into state government gains for the Polo Patriótico.

Like the PP, AD also won control of eight state governors, but in contrast to the Chávez alliance, this was without the support of any other major parties. The extent to which Chávez's political organisation could have mounted a coherent challenge to AD without the support of MAS and PPT is evident. Although AD lost control of four governors, the party demonstrated an ability to retain electoral popularity in rural areas of historical strength.

Table 2 State governor elections 1995-98

Party	1995	1998
AD	12	8
MVR	n/a	1
PV	1	1
COPEI	3	5
MAS	4	3
PPT	n/a	3
LCR	1	1
CVG	1	1
Total	22	23

Source: Consejo Nacional Electoral, *Elecciones 98*.

Note: number of states rose to 23 with the creation of Vargas in 1997, Proyecto Venezuela (PV)

One of the most noticeable trends in the November elections was that governors standing for re-election retained their seats. Seventeen of the twenty incumbent governors won a second successive term. It would seem that preferences expressed in this election were strongly influenced by regional leadership and local issues rather than the national political debate. However, the level of support expressed for the parties in the governorship elections translated almost exactly in the congressional elections. AD received 43 per cent of the congressional vote and 35 per cent of the governorship vote, whilst the PP gained 33.7 per cent of the congressional vote and 35 per cent of the governorship vote. In the context of this analysis, the most significant aspect of the results was the relative weakness of the MVR performance, specifically considering the scale of changes that Chávez went on to introduce. The extent to which these November results influenced the strategy of constitutional reform subsequently pursued by Chávez is evidenced by his decision to close the elected congress after the referendum of April 1999. In the absence of a strong performance by MVR, the reformist intentions of Chávez necessarily followed an anti-democratic trajectory.

Table 3 Congressional deputies elected 1993-98

Party	Deputies		Senate	
	1993	1998	1993	1998
AD	53	64	17	20
MVR	n/a	44	n/a	12
COPEI	51	26	15	8
PV	n/a	20	n/a	4
MAS	22	19	8	5
PPT	n/a	7	n/a	2
CVG	23	2	4	2
LCR	40	5	8	1
Others	18	21	0	3
Total	207	208	52	57

Source: VenEconomy Monthly, November 1998, p. 28.

MVR had moved away from its abstentionist stand in 1996 in order to contest the elections in 1998. The party did so on the basis that it represented a vehicle for voters who were discontented with the electoral system and had consequently abstained from participating. Despite the Polo Patriótico representing a new alternative, they did not significantly reduce the level of abstention in the elections. The assumption that the movement would capitalise on the votes of a reservoir of disaffected voters proved not to be the case. In the governorship elections abstention did fall in all but three states but overall the level of abstention remained high, with over a third of voters abstaining from participating in both the governorship and congressional elections. Abstention did fall significantly in individual states such as Aragua and Guarico, which were won by the Polo Patriótico alliance. In these two instances the fall in abstention was not as high as that recorded in Carabobo where incumbent Proyecto Venezuela candidate Henrique Salas Feo won the election. Similarly abstention dropped significantly in Miranda, which was retained by the incumbent COPEI governor Enrique Mendoza. MVR therefore failed to reduce abstention and by definition, alienation from the political system. Where abstention did fall, this was linked to the efficacy perception of incumbent governors rather than the emergence of new party political options.

Table 4 **Abstention in elections for state governor (%)**

State	1995	Winning Party	1998	winning party
Amazonas	36.7	AD	33.2	AD
Anzoategui	47.1	AD	45.6	MVR-PPT
Apure	43.9	AD	39.7	AD
Aragua	62.3	MAS	49.7	MAS-MVR-COPEI
Barinas	42.1	AD	39.8	MVR-MAS
Bolivar	53.1	AD	47.6	AD
Carabobo	59.6	Proyecto Carabobo	39.9	PV
Cojedes	34.1	AD	35.5	AD
Delta Am.	35.2	AD-COPEI	35.4	COPEI-MERI-AD
Falcón	46	COPEI	41.2	COPEI
Guárico	52.7	AD	39.9	MVR-PPT-MAS
Lara	52.1	CVG-MAS	49.5	MAS-MVR-CVG
Merida	44.7	AD	40.8	AD
Miranda	62.3	COPEI	47.4	COPEI
Monagas	43.4	AD	41.7	AD
Nueva Esp.	36.7	COPEI-CVG-MAS	40.7	COPEI-MAS
Portuguesa	43.2	MAS-COPEI-CVG	40	COPEI-MAS-CVG
Sucre	48.5	MAS-COPEI	46.4	AD
Tachira	48.4	AD	39.7	COPEI
Trujillo	45.4	AD	44.4	AD
Vargas	n/a		46.6	MVR-MAS-PPT
Yaracuy	39.7	CVG-MAS	42	CVG
Zulia	52.3	LCR-Voz	48	COPEI-LCR-MVR

Source: Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Tomo de Elecciones*, Indra, *Elecciones de 1998*.

7.2 Prelude to December

In conjunction with a fresh round of opinion poll surveys, the November election results prompted AD and COPEI to re-evaluate their electoral strategies ahead of the presidential contest. The November elections catalysed a series of major changes within both parties as the recently elected state governors emerged as powerful factions in their own right. This was to have consequences beyond the presidential elections, with both parties confused over internal authority and direction after the events of 1998. As AD and COPEI struggled to redefine their organisational norms and procedures, Chávez was given a free hand to proceed with the constitutional reform process and the elimination of political arenas that were not under his control.

In AD concerns persisted that Luis Alfaro Uceró failed to reach double figures in opinion polls. After November the eight recently elected state governors openly expressed their discontent with his candidacy. They interpreted their own victories as an endorsement of their personal leadership not an expression of support for AD as a party. Their position was supported by Datánalisis opinion polls. These indicated that Alfaro Uceró was locked on 8 per cent of support and that only 37 per cent of AD militants were prepared to vote for him. 19 per cent claimed they would vote for Chávez and 39 per cent for Salas Romer. Preferences expressed in the state governor elections would not then automatically translate into an endorsement of the same party candidate. This was primarily linked to the fact that many of the governors were standing for re-election, whereas the presidential contest was dominated by independent figures that had not previously run for the presidency.²⁵ Supporting this was evidence that Hugo Chávez's popularity continued to increase. Whilst the PP alliance had received the support of just under a third of voters in the November elections, it was clear that this did not represent the real level of support enjoyed by Hugo Chávez. The dilemma for AD was thus the reverse of that of the PP.

Table 5 Opinion polls surveying voting intentions in the presidential election, March–October 1998 (%)

Candidate	March	June	August	September	October
Chavez	30	41	46	48	43
Salas	18	20	24	22	31
Sáez	24	18	12	12	8
Fermín	14	6	5	3	3
Uceró	2	5	6	6	7

Source: Consultores 21, Insight 21, VeneEconomy, November 1998.

Not only was support for Chávez rising, but the independent Proyecto Venezuela candidate Henrique Salas Romer, was also performing strongly. The emergence of Salas was largely at the expense of Irene Sáez. There was little to distinguish between the platforms of Salas and Sáez, with both candidates endorsing free market and political reforms and greater decentralisation. Salas was however distinguished by the absence of any links to the traditional parties. For voters against the radical changes propounded by Chávez but supportive of moderate reform, Salas was emerging as the preferred option over the COPEI candidate Sáez.

In recognition of the changing electoral configuration, the central executive of AD voted by thirty nine votes to five that Alfaro Uceró renounce the candidacy. Alfaro Uceró was not

willing to stand down and as a result he was expelled from the party for indiscipline. AD subsequently focused on creating a Polo Democrático to challenge the Polo Patriótico. COPEI governors shared this aim. Power considerations led the governors to conclude that Irene Sáez was no longer a viable presidential candidate and their position triumphed within the wider party. The Salas camp was initially reticent to accept the support of AD and COPEI, mindful of the deterioration of support experienced by Irene Sáez. However, Salas was persuaded by the AD and COPEI argument that a democratic pole was the only way to defeat Chávez. Proyecto Venezuela needed AD and COPEI as much as they needed him. The movement had won just one governorship and twenty one seats in congress and it seemed unlikely that Salas could catch up with Chávez before election day.

Table 6. Poll surveying voting intentions in the presidential election

Candidate	November 25	December 1
Chávez	55	58
Salas	26	30

Source: Consultores 21, Insight 21, VeneEconomy, November 1998.

On November 30, Salas officially accepted the support of A.D. and COPEI. The move was presented as a democratic necessity, forged by the prospects of success by an ‘authoritarian’ candidate. This focus on the anti-democratic traits of Chávez was a mistaken strategy. It left the parties incapable of coherently articulating opposition to Chávez after his victory in December. Further to this, it was a hypocritical posture as AD and COPEI had demonstrated a profound inability to embrace meaningful democratic reform. In polarising the terms of the debate around the concept of democracy itself, any discussion of economic policy – Chávez’s weakness - was negated, enabling PP to set the terms of the political discourse.

The formation of the Polo Democrático presented major problems for the CNE as Sáez and Alfaro Ucero appeared on the pre-printed ballot papers as the candidates of COPEI and AD respectively. A solution was found when Indra revised its software. This enabled a vote expressed for Sáez on a COPEI ticket to be read as a vote for Salas Romer. Similarly, a vote for Alfaro Ucero on the AD ticket would be redirected towards Salas. It was a move that did little to improve weak public confidence in the electoral system. At the same time these last minute maneuvers reflected desperation on the part of AD and COPEI which only assisted Chávez by creating an air of inevitability of his electoral success.

8. The December election

The results of the presidential election reflected the intense level of polarisation between Chávez and Salas who jointly received 96 per cent of the votes.

Table 7 Presidential election results December 1998

Candidate	supporting organizations	vote (%)
<i>H. Chávez</i>		56.2
MVR		40.2
MAS		9
PPT		2.2
PCV		1.2
Others		3.6
<i>H. Salas</i>		40
PV		28.7
AD		9.1
COPEI		2.1
Others		0.1
<i>I. Sáez</i>		2.8
IRENE		2
Others		0.8
<i>L. Alfaro</i>	<i>ORA</i>	0.4
Others		1

Source: Indra, *Elecciones Presidenciales 1998*.

Votes for Chávez in the presidential contest were more than double those registered by the Polo Patriótico in the November elections. This underlined a number of changes to patterns of voting behaviour in Venezuela. As had been predicted by the state governors, support for a party in the regional elections did not automatically translate into an endorsement of the same party presidential candidate. The electorate had therefore used differential modes of evaluating their options at local and regional level. That Chávez outperformed his alliance organisation represented the highly personalist nature of his appeal.

Chávez dominated the election in seventeen states. His pattern of support was distinct. Whereas in 1993, the presidential vote for non-traditional challengers LCR had been concentrated in urban areas and that for Caldera in predominately rural states, support for Chávez in 1998 was spread across states, regardless of socio-economic or demographic characteristics. Chávez was also the first option in states which had traditionally remained loyal to AD and COPEI. As an example of this, the AD candidate Claudío Fermín had dominated the presidential vote in Monagas, Guarico, Barinas, Sucre and Trujillo in 1993. An entrenched AD legacy in these areas was overturned by Chávez in 1998. Similarly in Zulia and Cojedes, where the COPEI candidate in the 1993 elections had been the preference for a majority of voters, Chávez dominated the presidential vote in 1998. Whilst voters in these traditionally AD and COPEI states opted for Chávez in the presidential election, they had largely maintained their loyalties to AD and COPEI in the congressional elections a month earlier.

A particular complication in evaluating the preferences of voters was that votes for Chávez and Salas were predominantly expressed on the ballot paper as a vote for MVR and Proyecto Venezuela. According to the official results, AD contributed only 9.1 per cent of votes to the Salas campaign and MAS only 9 per cent to that of Chávez. However, given the late changes to the ballot papers, and the automatic transferal of votes for AD and COPEI to Salas, many

voters may have foregone party identification and voted directly for the alliance candidates under their own party tickets, MVR and Proyecto Venezuela. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the net contribution of the allied parties to Chávez and Salas. Nonetheless, given the high levels of support for Chávez in traditionally *Adeco* and *Copeyano* states, it is clear that AD and COPEI failed to translate historical expressions of support for their own party candidates into an endorsement of Salas Romer. Within PP, the high level of support expressed for Chávez on the MVR slate was subsequently used by the government to concentrate authority around the president. In this respect, PPT and MAS were not seen as having contributed substantively to his presidential victory, leading MVR to the mistaken conclusion that they were a majority governing party, rather than an organisation dependent on alliance support (as revealed in the November election results).

Salas Romer won the presidential contest in just five states. In only two of these, Amazonas and Apure, did AD contribute substantively to the Salas vote total. In Amazonas, where Salas received 54.3 per cent of the votes, 29.9 per cent was expressed as a vote for AD and in Apure, where Salas Romer gained 60 per cent, 35.4 per cent was automatically transferred from the AD ticket. In every other state, a vote for Salas was expressed through the Proyecto Venezuela ticket. As a result, AD and COPEI received their lowest ever share of the vote in any election, 9.1 per cent and 2.1 per cent respectively. Support for Salas Romer was additionally confined to rural areas with either low population levels or high poverty levels. He did not win a majority or plurality of votes in large, populated states; this even included his hometown of Carabobo. This underlined a new political reality in Venezuelan presidential elections, which had first emerged in the elections of 1993. Voters in rural and urban states were largely predisposed to vote for different types of candidates. Whilst voters in rural states tended to support 'conservative' forces, voters living in densely populated urban areas backed 'new' reformist options. This was revealed in the relative support bases of Caldera and Velásquez in 1993 and it was consolidated in the state governor and congressional elections of 1993 and 1998. A presidential bid in Venezuela could only succeed with a majority endorsement if the candidate appealed to a cross section of Venezuelan society. This was reflected in the subsequent victory of Chávez and the defeat of the 'rurally concentrated' Salas.

A mandate for radical reform?

Despite the fact that one candidate in the election was promising a radical transformation of the country and that the 1998 election was one of the most tense and polarised in Venezuelan democratic history, the level of abstention was high. Although it fell from the record 39 per cent registered in the 1993 elections, this was by less than 3 per cent. The official abstention figure revealed that 36.2 per cent of registered voters abstained from participating in a critical election contest. The high level of abstention in previous elections had been attributed to two factors, disaffection with the existing political system and concerns over electoral fraud. However, the 1998 elections were held under manifestly different conditions to previous contests. The process was fully automated to reduce fraud and 92 per cent of machines worked without problems on election day. In an unprecedented development, a large contingent of International Observers were also present for the election.²⁶ If abstention was related to a lack of confidence in the administration of elections, the reforms of December 1997 clearly failed to attenuate these concerns. The view that abstention was related to political alienation was also undermined by the presence of one, if not two candidates offering meaningful political reform. Yet despite the absence of 'traditional' party candidates, abstention was not assuaged. Examining a breakdown of the abstention trend in

individual states, it is evident that areas which voted for Salas Romer also tended to experience a rise in the abstention level on that recorded in 1993. This was the case in Amazonas, Delta Amacuro and Nueva Esparta. Hence in three of the six states that voted for Salas Romer, abstention actually increased. Falcón could perhaps also be added here as abstention only fell by 0.3%. A similar pattern is also revealed in states where Chávez won the presidential race. Although abstention fell in twelve of the seventeen states where he won a plurality of votes, it actually increased in five. Therefore although Chávez was seen to win a comprehensive electoral victory in the presidential contest, this was on a high level of abstention at the national level, with abstention increasing in a number of states where he dominated the presidential race. Given the national abstention rate was 36 per cent and Chávez received 56.2 per cent, he was elected with the support of just 33.5 per cent of the electorate. This cannot be considered a mandate for sweeping constitutional reform.

Table 8 **Beakdown of presidential election results 1998**

State	Abstention (%)		Chávez (%)	Salas (%)
	1993	1998		
D. Fed	42.2	34	62.5	31.5
*Amazonas	35.5	38	44	54.3
Anzoátegui	40.9	38.9	62	35.1
*Apure	40.5	36.6	38.6	60
Aragua	41.4	34	69	26.3
Barinas	37.2	33.9	64.8	33.7
Bolívar	41.9	40.1	59.1	37.6
Carabobo	40.4	33.4	52.7	43.9
Cojedes	33.9	34	54.8	43.3
*Delta Am.	37.1	38.9	46	52.2
*Falcón	38.7	38.4	47.6	48.4
Guárico	41.9	35.3	56.5	41.4
Lara	36.8	36.2	58.5	38.1
Mérida	39.8	33.1	51.5	45.3
Miranda	39	33.4	51.5	43
Monagas	35	36.4	56.5	40.9
*N. Esparta	38.7	39.2	44.8	51.2
Portuguesa	34.6	34.9	63.3	33.7
Sucre	43.9	41	51.4	46.3
*Táchira	37.7	33.5	47.9	49
Trujillo	41.3	36.5	53.8	44.1
Yaracuy	36.6	38.3	50	46.7
Zulia	40.6	41.6	55.3	40.8
Vargas	n/a	35	62.7	33

Source: Indra, *Elecciones Presidenciales 1998*. Note: * indicates Salas victory.

Polo Patriótico and Polo Democrático used the same argument to justify the high abstention rate. In their interpretation, voters considered that the victory of Chávez, as predicted in opinion polls, was a foregone conclusion. According to this logic, supporters of Salas and Chávez decided their vote was not going to make a difference to the final result and abstained. An alternative view is that Chávez and Salas failed to win support from an unincorporated middle ground of voters. In this respect, people who were opposed to the radical message of Chávez did not endorse Salas because he had become identified with AD

and COPEI. Alternatively, a large section of the electorate did support radical reform of the existing political institutions. They did not however see Chávez as the right vehicle for these aspirations. People therefore abstained because neither candidate offered the preferred mode or model of political reform. This links in with a final interpretation of the abstention trend, which relates back to 'historical' explanations for the high levels of abstention in Venezuela.

Abstention in 1988 and 1993 ran parallel with extreme levels of expressed disaffection with political parties and politicians. This did not attenuate despite the emergence of new political options in the form of MVR and Proyecto Venezuela. Opinion poll research conducted by the *Wall St. Journal* in April 1999 showed that 91 per cent of Venezuelans surveyed had little or no confidence in political parties and 83 per cent had no confidence in congress. It would appear that the delegitimization of the Punto Fijo state might have affected not only those organisations associated with its foundation, but those who emerged in opposition to it. Chávez, Salas and their supporting organisations (MAS, PPT and PCV for Chávez, AD and COPEI for Salas) were not seen to represent a clean break from the past. They were all 'historical' figures or 'historical' parties. As such, the electorate viewed neither electoral option as convincingly distinct. The election of Chávez did not therefore represent popular demands for drastic political change but continuity with a pre-existing crisis of political legitimacy in Venezuela.

9. Conclusion

The evidence since December 1998 would indicate that Hugo Chávez represents nothing but continuity with the Punto Fijo system – or alternatively, its rebirth. This can be seen on three levels. Firstly, the constitutional reform process was achieved through restricting the democratic space open to competitors, a method established by AD. Overriding both judicial and congressional opposition, the constituent assembly controversially assumed organic powers, as favoured by Chávez in August 1999. This gave the assembly sovereign authority over all branches of the state, including the presidency and the elected national congress was acriminously dissolved. Limitations on the development of a substantive democratic space have been further evidenced in Chávez's use of state funds to promote approval of the constitution and the elevation of MVR affiliated candidates to 'neutral' positions in the state administration. Further to this, the government has pushed through extensive change to the institutional fabric of the country without seeking to improve the legitimacy of the political process. 'Reform' has been achieved with the approval of a simple – and small plurality of voters and the government has rejected any argument that persistently high abstention has undermined the legitimacy of the reform process. The second element of continuity relates to the populist characteristics of the government. Chávez has sought to redefine the political culture of a country where once it held true that '*to be Venezuelan is to be an Adeco*'. In attempting to redefine the culture as *Chavista*, the administration has relied heavily on anti-traditional party rhetoric. This denies social pluralism and negates the validity of free choice. In typically populist, if not Adeco fashion, internal party democracy has been negated, with all power concentrated around the executive. Finally, the administration has increased dependence on oil revenue, in contrast to its stated aims of diversifying the economic base. This was clear throughout 1999, when the steep rise in oil prices allowed the government fiscal latitude to focus on political 'modernisation'. Necessary and unpopular adjustment measures have been avoided, at cost to the long-term health of the economy.

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- ²² S. Ellner 'Left Parties in Regional Power', *NACLA*, July / August 1995.
- ²³ Queremos Elegir and Escuela de Vecinos had been pressing for reform of the CSE since the 1980s.
- ²⁴ 'Venezuela's Legislative and Regional Elections, an assessment report', The International Republican Institute, November 23, 1998.
- ²⁵ An example of this was the work by the Instituto de Formación e Investigación Electoral cited in the article '¿Cuánto influirán los resultados regionales en las Elecciones Presidenciales?', *El Nacional*, 9 November 1998.
- ²⁶ This included delegations from the Carter Centre, the International Republican Institute, the European Union, the Andean Parliament, the Organisation of American states, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador.

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- ¹ A. Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ² Daniel Levine was a central proponent of this position. See D. Levine, 'The Transition to Democracy: are there lessons to be learnt from Venezuela?' *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 4:2 (1985); D. Levine, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973).
- ³ See T. L. Karl, 'Petroleum and Political Pacts, the Transition to Democracy in Venezuela', *Latin American Research Review*, 1987, 22:1.
- ⁴ E. Torres in J. Molina, *Democracia representativa y participacion politica en Venezuela*, (Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos, Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Electoral, San Jose, 1986), p.50.
- ⁵ E. Baloyra and J. Martz, *Political Attitudes in Venezuela: Societal Cleavages and Political Opinion* (Austin, Texas, Texas University Press, 1979), p. 51.
- ⁶ F. Welsch, *Nueva Sociedad*, 121, September 1992.
- ⁷ F. Jongkind, 'Venezuelan industry under the new conditions of the 1989 economic policy', *European review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 54 (1993).
- ⁸ F. Welsch, *Nueva Sociedad*, 121, September 1992.
- ⁹ E. Baloyra and J. Martz, *Political Attitudes in Venezuela* p. 185
- ¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of government economic policy see M. Naím and R. Pinango, *El caso venezolano: Una ilusión de armonía* (Caracas, Ediciones IESA, 1984); R. Leon, *Los efectos perversos del petróleo* (Caracas, Capriles, 1990); D. Urbaneja, *Pueblo y petróleo en la política venezolana del siglo XX* (Caracas, CEPET, 1992).
- ¹¹ Poll by *Datánalisis* in J. Molina, p. 50.
- ¹² *Tomo de Elecciones*, Consejo Supremo Electoral (Caracas).
- ¹³ *Sic*, March 1992. p. 53
- ¹⁴ R. Delgado, *Sic*, March 1993, p. 59.
- ¹⁵ *Fundación Pensamiento y Acción*, 'Cultura Democrática en Venezuela: Informe Analítico de los Resultados de una Encuesta de Opinión Pública', (Caracas, January 1996).
- ¹⁶ *Fundación Pensamiento y Acción*, 'Cultura Democrática en Venezuela', p. 33.
- ¹⁷ The official abstention figure issued by the Consejo Supremo Electoral was disputed by Maingon and Patruyo whose analysis revealed an abstention rate of 57 per cent. T. Maingon, and T. Patruyo, 'Las elecciones locales y regionales de 1995: Tendencias políticas', *Cuestiones Políticas*, 16, 1996.
- ¹⁸ Opinion polls measuring public confidence in the independent members of the CSE and attitudes to their presence in the organisation of elections can be found in an article by A. Sosa in *Sic*, March 1995.
- ¹⁹ M. Rodríguez, interview in J. Buxton, *The Venezuelan Party System 1988-1995: With Reference to the Rise and Decline of La Causa Radical*, PhD, London School of Economics, 1998.
- ²⁰ Latinobarometro from the University of Texas website.
- ²¹ Chávez cited in A. Blanco Muñoz, *Habla El Comandante*, (Caracas, Fundación Cátedra Pío Tamayo, 1998) p. 292
- ²² S. Ellner 'Left Parties in Regional Power', *NACLA*, July / August 1995.
- ²³ Queremos Elegir and the Escuela de Vecinos had been pressing for a reform of the C.S.E. since the late 1980s. They were supported by the American organisation, the International Republican Institute.
- ²⁴ 'Venezuela's Legislative and Regional Elections, an assessment report', The International Republican Institute, November 23 1998
- ²⁵ An example of this was the work by the Instituto de Formación e Investigación Electoral cited in the article '¿Cuánto influirán los resultados regionales en las Elecciones Presidenciales?', *El Nacional*, 9 November 1998.
- ²⁶ This included delegations from the Carter Centre, the International Republican Institute, the European Union, the Andean Parliament, the Organisation of American states, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador