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# ***From Bullets to Ballots: The Emergence of Popular Support for Hugo Chávez***

*Damarys Canache*

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## ABSTRACT

The election of Hugo Chávez as Venezuela's president in 1998, less than seven years after his unsuccessful military coup attempt, marked a pivotal moment in one of the most dramatic political transformations in the nation's history. This article explores public reaction to Chávez's shift, especially the question of why Venezuelans would entrust democratic governance to a man who had once attempted to topple the nation's democratic regime. Two hypotheses are proposed: one of converted militancy and one of democratic ambivalence. Analysis of survey data from 1995 and 1998 demonstrates that Chávez's initial base of support drew heavily on Venezuelans who were ambivalent or hostile toward democracy. By 1998, and consistent with the converted militant hypothesis, Chávez won support from a substantial portion of citizens who valued democracy. Yet democratic ambivalence also contributed to Chávez's winning electoral coalition.

Most Venezuelans encountered Hugo Chávez Frías for the first time on February 4, 1992, when the young military officer appeared on national television to concede the failure of the military insurrection he and his fellow middle-rank officers had launched against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. In acknowledging his defeat, Chávez proclaimed that it was only for the moment that his movement could not achieve its objectives. True to his word, seven years later, in February 1999, Chávez walked into the Venezuelan Congress as the legitimately elected new president of one of South America's oldest democracies.

The precipitous emergence of Chávez's leadership is a phenomenon that will intrigue observers and analysts of Venezuelan politics for years to come. He won the 1998 presidential election with relative ease, capturing 56.2 percent of the vote. Considering the nation's economic instability over the foregoing decade, moreover, Venezuelans might have been highly reluctant to entrust their nation's future to someone who had attempted to topple democratic governance just a few years before. Therefore, one key to understanding Hugo Chávez's election as president is to determine how he was able to build mass support in the period between 1992 and 1998. That is the question this study seeks to answer.

What happened in Venezuela in 1998 is not an isolated phenomenon. Ex-military men have entered electoral politics elsewhere in Latin America. In Bolivia the ex-dictator Hugo Banzer (1971–78) was elected president in 1997. In Peru, General Jaime Salinas Sedó, mastermind of the 1992 failed coup against President Fujimori, expressed interest in running for president in the late 1990s; he ultimately ran as a candidate of the Popular Action party in the 2000 legislative election. Insight on the mass support that ex-military leaders develop therefore may provide understanding of the consensus that gives them their mandate and the nature of democracy in these nations.

Intuitively, we surely would not anticipate that failed coup leaders would become successful democratic players. Coup leaders who later choose to follow democratic rules may develop the necessary skills and resources to enter the electoral arena, but it does not necessarily follow that their efforts will resonate with a nation's citizens. To the contrary, it is easier to imagine that citizens would reject such figures. As Chávez's case illustrates, however, substantial popular support for former coup leaders is possible in democratic polities. What remains in question is how and why citizens come to view former coup leaders favorably. Although focus on the leader—that is, on his trajectory from military rebel to democratic player—can shed light on the leader's efforts to win election, focus on the followers is also needed to provide insight into the attributes and political views held by those individuals who render support to the leader.

Chávez's victory in 1998 was the result of multiple convergent factors, including the deterioration of the living standards of most Venezuelans, the perception of generalized political corruption, the decay of traditional parties, the construction of electoral alliances, and a dynamic electoral campaign.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, one key component of Chávez's victory was the existence of an early foundation of popular support. Had Venezuelans united to reject Chávez following the 1992 coup attempt, he could not have positioned himself later as a viable presidential candidate.

Instead of viewing Chávez with widespread scorn, many Venezuelans rallied intensely following the 1992 coup attempt, calling for Chávez's release from prison (Coppedge 1992). Public opinion studies conducted at that time bear out Chávez's substantial popular support. Zago (1998) reports that opinion polls conducted four months after the failed coup showed that 67.4 percent of people in Caracas had a positive image of Hugo Chávez. Chávez's popularity remained high; López Maya reports that in mid-1993, Chávez's approval rating was about 55 percent (1998, 91). Public opinion data for the period 1994–96 reflect a declining trend in Chávez's initial popularity. It could be argued, however, that Chávez had already made significant progress: his name consistently appeared as a viable third alternative in voters' preferences for

the 1998 presidential election. By 1996 Chávez occupied third place in the polls (9.7 percent) after Irene Sáez, mayor of the municipality of Chacao in the metropolitan area of Caracas, who was in the first place with 34 percent of voters' preferences; and Henrique Salas Romer, the ex-governor of Carabobo, with 10.8 percent (López Maya 1998, 91–92).

Thus Chávez built, throughout the decade, the base of popular support that would culminate in the paradox of the 1998 Venezuelan election: the selection of a former antidemocratic leader by democratic means. As to how he did it, multiple theories exist. To explore the characteristics of individuals who embraced his leadership, this study develops two hypotheses: the converted militant hypothesis and the democratic ambivalence hypothesis. The first hypothesis holds that Chávez constructed his electoral coalition among Venezuelans who believed that he no longer represented a threat to democracy as a form of government. The second implies that Chávez constructed a base of mass support by appealing to Venezuelans who did not value democracy.

These hypotheses are tested using individual-level survey data from two separate years: 1995 and 1998. Data from 1995 are used to assess the nature of mass support for Chávez in the first year following his release from prison. Data from November 1998 are examined to determine in what manner, if any, the structure of support for Chávez changed between 1995 and the eve of his election. The 1995 survey was conducted between January and March 1995 among residents of Venezuela's two largest cities, Caracas and Maracaibo. Data from 1998 come from a national survey conducted in November, a month before the election.

## **EXPLAINING CHÁVEZ'S RISE**

Not surprisingly, explanations of the Chávez phenomenon have proliferated in all realms of Venezuelan life. It is virtually impossible to find a Venezuelan citizen unwilling to offer a line of reasoning as to how Chávez became a central player in contemporary Venezuelan politics. These interpretations range from arguments that emphasize the expressive and symbolic features of Chávez's leadership to a realpolitik of plots and negotiations among elites. José Luis Uzcátegui (1999), for example, characterizes Chávez as a "magician of emotions" and attributes his electoral triumph to a combination of psychological and sociological elements that created a political climate favorable to the diffusion and reception of the message of the young, charismatic leader. As a candidate, Chávez tapped into expectations, illusions, fears, doubts, worries, and emotions in a population profoundly disenchanted with the existing political regime.

Leonardo Vivas (1999) argues that several political events combined to position Chávez favorably: President Rafael Caldera's decision to

release Chávez from prison in 1994, the unsuccessful campaign tactics of Sáez and Salas Romer, the erosion of Venezuela's traditional political parties, and the organizational strength of Chávez's party, *Movimiento V República*. A more cynical interpretation of the 1998 election is offered by Roger Santodomingo (1999), for whom Chávez's victory is a byproduct of the continuing struggle for influence and power among prominent economic elites and their political allies.

Research on Venezuela's sociopolitical history in the last two decades has begun to uncover the existence of a longstanding anti-establishment movement involving a complex matrix of communication, coordination, and alliances between military factions and far-left political groups (see, for example, Blanco Muñoz 1998; Garrido 1999).<sup>2</sup> It can be argued that in the years before 1992, the formation of an alliance of military and civilian actors opposed to the established political system supplied the initial resources, both political and organizational, with which Chávez's leadership would develop. Such a political coalition would be key for Chávez once he decided to advance his political agenda via the electoral arena.

Although provocative, these explanations of Chávez's success are insufficient in various aspects. First, some of them are speculative. The analysts have not advanced and tested scientific hypotheses. Consequently, they provide no basis to assess the relative accuracy of competing explanations. Second, most accounts of Chávez's victory are elite-based: they focus on Chávez, the economic elites, military and political actors, and the media. The opinions and behavior of voters are implicitly assumed to be the result of a top-down process of political communication. Because mass opinion is given limited attention, these explanations sidestep the key dilemma posed by Chávez's victory. Institutional and elite-level factors may explain why the traditional parties failed in 1998, but these factors by themselves do not explain why Chávez won the presidential election. It remains plausible that voters could have rejected the former coup leader. To ascertain why they did not, we must focus attention at the mass level.

## **CHÁVEZ'S EARLY POLITICAL HISTORY**

Although most Venezuelans did not meet Chávez until February 1992, Chávez's first steps in politics began about a decade earlier, when he was one of the founders of the *Ejército Revolucionario Bolivariano* (ERB-200), a discussion group composed of middle-rank military officials. Inspired by the ideas of Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar, and Ezequiel Zamora, this group's original objectives were not explicitly political but institutional, involving the study of Venezuelan military history and the development of new military doctrine for the Venezuelan armed forces (Zago 1998).

The implementation of the economic “shock therapy” program introduced by President Carlos Andrés Pérez shortly after his inauguration sparked bloody riots that exploded in Venezuela’s main cities in February 1989. In their wake, the ERB-200 evolved into a clandestine movement, the Movimiento Bolivariano 200 (MBR-200) (Blanco Muñoz 1998, 58). This movement, Chávez’s original pulpit, was conceived as a civil-military organization that rejected the military’s sectarianism and fundamentalism and sought to integrate civilian groups (López Maya 1998, 89).

Analyzing the nation’s sociopolitical situation, the eventual leaders of the MBR-200 had become convinced as early as 1986 that political action was needed and had begun considering the possibility of launching a military insurrection (Zago 1998). The February 1989 riots revitalized this vision. In one leader’s view, February 1989 marked the beginning of a revolutionary revival in which the various revolutionary movements in civil society and the military intensified communication and coordination efforts (Garrido 1999, 23). Chávez expressed the same opinion in a 1995 interview: “the F-89 [February 1989] massacre sensitized many military men, especially the youngest, who were the ones that experience the terror the most” (quoted in Blanco Muñoz 1998, 183; on this point see also García Márquez 2000).

Chávez, of course, played a key role in the events of February 4, 1992. His actions, especially his 72-second appearance on national television, followed by his subsequent imprisonment, marked the beginning of Chávez’s transformation into a leader of the masses.

In 1994, President Caldera granted amnesty to all military officers who had participated in the rebellions of 1992. Chávez, who was forced to resign from the army as a condition of his release, immediately mounted a campaign to mobilize civilian political support. He made public his aspiration to the presidency of the republic (López Maya 1998, 89) and began an ambitious campaign effort, in which he traveled extensively throughout Venezuela. Largely on the strength of Chávez’s efforts, the MBR-200 acquired national prominence as the base of activity for ex-military and leftist militants (Vivas 1999).

Transformed into an overt political organization, the MBR-200 centered its political strategy on the convocation of a national constitutional assembly, which was conceived as a means to produce peaceful revolutionary change. Chávez and the MBR-200 advocated electoral abstention in the 1993 national elections and 1995 regional elections. This tactical position changed dramatically in 1996, when the MBR-200’s national directive opted for participation in the upcoming 1998 national elections.

As an explanation, Chávez asserted in a 1997 interview that about 95 percent of the National Assembly’s members had decided in favor of participation in the 1998 elections. He further said that the MBR-200 had commissioned a mass survey to measure popular approval of the new

political strategy, as well as support for Chávez's candidacy. According to Chávez, results from the survey showed considerable approval (65 percent) for the MBR-200's participation in the elections, and indicated that a substantial portion of the population (50 percent) would vote for Chávez (interview September 25, 1997, cited in Blanco Muñoz 1998, 405–6).

In planning his 1998 campaign, Chávez founded the *Movimiento V República* (MVR). This party headed the leftist coalition *Patriotic Pole* (*Polo Patriótico*), which eventually helped Chávez win the presidential race in December 1998.<sup>3</sup> During the electoral campaign, Chávez made clear his intention to implement drastic changes that would overturn the Venezuelan status quo, calling for a national constitutional assembly, the wholesale redesign of the judicial system, and the slowing of economic reform.<sup>4</sup>

## **POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR CHÁVEZ'S POPULAR SUPPORT**

Two plausible arguments can be advanced to explain why Venezuelans supported a failed coup leader and elected an authoritarian. The first, which can be called the converted militant hypothesis, holds that Chávez constructed his electoral coalition among Venezuelans who believed that he no longer represented a threat to democracy as a form of government. Chávez somehow convinced Venezuelans that he had undergone a political conversion. Instead of promoting the violent overthrow of democracy, he now would lead peaceful democratic change.

From this perspective, Chávez's supporters valued democracy as a form of government, but they were dissatisfied with traditional political institutions and actors. Chávez's supporters probably admitted to themselves that some risk was inherent in siding with a militant, but given the dire state of politics in Venezuela, they concluded that this was a risk they had to take.

The second proposition, which can be labeled the democratic ambivalence hypothesis, is that Chávez's supporters were unconcerned with the potential risk that Chávez posed to democratic governance for the simple reason that they themselves were not committed to democracy as a form of government. The possibility that candidate Chávez would, if elected, attempt to dismantle democracy would be problematic only for people who cherished democracy. The democratic ambivalence hypothesis implies that Chávez constructed a base of mass support by appealing to Venezuelans who did not value democracy.

The two hypotheses bear fundamentally different implications regarding the nature of Chávez's base of mass support. Evidence consistent with the converted militant hypothesis would suggest that Venezuelans can forgive even the most egregious transgressions against democ-

racy if they perceive that, by doing so, their government can be improved. In contrast, evidence consistent with the democratic ambivalence hypothesis would suggest that the Venezuelans who mobilized in support of Chávez were unconcerned with the prospect of violent action.

These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Chávez could have received support both from Venezuelans indifferent toward democracy and from those who valued democracy and perceived Chávez to be a converted militant.

## **SUPPORT FOR CHÁVEZ IN 1995**

The democratic ambivalence hypothesis posits that Chávez drew substantial support from citizens uncommitted to democracy. Thus the question to be posed is whether the individual-level propensity to express positive affect toward Chávez hinged partly on democratic ambivalence. One constraint in approaching this question is that public opinion surveys rarely provide optimal data for studying the emergence of a political leader. Survey organizations typically include the questions appropriate for this purpose only after the person already has gained some level of national prominence. Fortunately, data on Chávez are available in the 1995 survey.<sup>5</sup>

The 1995 survey asked respondents to name the most influential person in Venezuela. A list of seven individuals was presented, but respondents were told that they also could name a person not on the list. This portion of the survey was designed to assess opinion regarding prominent figures who were not affiliated with Venezuela's major parties. Thus, the list included Arturo Uslar Pietri, a renowned intellectual who played a key role as a political critic within the "group of notables"; José Vicente Rangel, a well-known journalist; church leader Monsignor Ali Lebrún; Andrés Velásquez, who ran for president in 1993 as the candidate of the leftist party La Causa-R; business leader Edgar Romero Navas; union leader Federico Ramírez León; and Hugo Chávez. Of the 897 respondents, 790 named someone they viewed as the most influential person in Venezuela; in all but 36 cases, respondents named one of the seven persons listed in the survey item.

A follow-up item asked respondents how much the individual they named also had influenced their personal political views. Four options were presented (a lot, some, a little, none); nearly 80 percent of the respondents indicated that the person they selected as influential nationally had at least some influence on them personally.

Data from these items are reported in table 1. More than three-fourths of respondents who named an influential person selected either Pietri, Rangel, or Chávez. Chávez, the third of these three, was named by more than twice as many respondents as the next person on the list,



Table 1. Perceptions of Hugo Chávez as Influential, 1995

	Most influential person in Venezuela		Individual personally influential for respondent
	Number	Percent	Number <sup>a</sup>
Arturo Uslar Pietri	229	29.0	193
José Vicente Rangel	194	24.6	159
Hugo Chávez	180	22.8	131
Monsignor Ali Lebrún	87	11.0	71
Andrés Velásquez	33	4.2	21
Edgar Romero Navas	26	3.3	18
Federico Ramírez León	5	0.6	3
Others (10 named)	36	4.6	24

<sup>a</sup>Number of respondents from column 1 who named the individual as having a lot or some influence on their personal views.

Source: 1995 Venezuela Survey.

Lebrún. Thus these data make clear that respondents viewed Chávez as being one of the most influential people outside the major parties in Venezuela in early 1995.

The last column in table 1 summarizes data from the follow-up item concerning influence on the respondent's personal views. The data show that 180 respondents viewed Chávez as the most influential person in Venezuela, and that Chávez influenced the personal political views of 131 of those 180.

Multivariate analysis centered on the data in this column. In constructing the dependent variable, the assumption is that people who view Chávez as both nationally and personally influential feel relatively positive toward him. Based on this operational definition of positive affect toward Chávez, the 131 respondents in the Chávez row of table 1 received scores of 1 on the dependent variable. Scores of 0 were assigned to the other 489 respondents, people who viewed someone other than Chávez as being personally and nationally influential.

The limits of this dependent variable are clear. Although it is reasonable to assume that respondents who receive a score of 1 do indeed hold Chávez in high esteem, the meaning of a score of 0 is less certain. A score of 0 implies only that the respondent views someone else as more influential than Chávez, not that the respondent disapproves of Chávez. Such imprecision in the dependent variable produces a conservative effect in multivariate models. In the present case, it is virtually certain that the aggregate level of positive affect for Chávez is understated (that is, some

respondents who supported Chávez nevertheless named someone else as the most influential person in Venezuela, and thus were coded 0). This would be problematic in models that produce null results because it would be impossible to tell whether null results signify the true absence of relationships or false negatives caused by “noise” in the dependent variable. Fortunately, no such ambiguity exists in the present case.<sup>6</sup>

The two central independent variables are support for democracy and support for political violence. In 1992, Chávez led a violent effort to topple democracy in Venezuela. Therefore, for Chávez to build a base of mass support in the period between 1992 and 1998, it was essential that Venezuelans not be troubled by the possibility that Chávez might remain a violent threat to democracy. The converted militant hypothesis holds that Venezuelans perceived Chávez to have changed his stripes since 1992. From this perspective, Chávez posed no risk to civil order because he had transformed himself from a violent revolutionary to a democratic reformer. The democratic ambivalence hypothesis, in contrast, holds that Venezuelans who supported Chávez were unconcerned with Chávez not because they believed that he had undergone a political conversion, but because they themselves were uncommitted to democracy as a form of government, and were perhaps even supportive of political violence. Data on support for democracy and attitudes toward political violence facilitate a direct test of these competing hypotheses.

The democratic ambivalence hypothesis implies that respondents who voiced unequivocal support for democracy should be relatively unlikely to hold Chávez in high esteem. Two items on the 1995 survey tapped levels of support for democracy. The first item asked, “In general, what type of government do you prefer, an elected government, a government imposed by force, or are they about the same?” The second question was, “In your judgment, what is the best form of government: democracy, dictatorship, or a revolutionary government?”

A dummy variable was produced by merging data from these items; the data were coded as 1 equaling unequivocal democrat (that is, the respondent chose democracy as the best form of government on both items), and 0 equaling equivocal democrat (the respondent did not choose democracy as the best form of government on both items).<sup>7</sup> A negative coefficient for this variable would be consistent with the democratic ambivalence hypothesis, as this would mean that people who support democracy as a form of government are unlikely to hold positive views of Chávez. In contrast, a null result or a positive coefficient for this variable would be consistent with the converted militant hypothesis. If Venezuelans viewed Chávez as posing no threat to democracy, then support for democracy and affect toward Chávez would be unrelated; if Venezuelans viewed Chávez as a possible leader of democratic reform, then supporters of democracy would view him favorably.

Support for political violence was measured with three items adapted from Muller (1979). These items asked respondents how much they approved of people invading private property; taking over factories, offices, and other buildings; and participating in groups that seek to overthrow the government by violent means. Each of the original items was coded 1 (strongly disapprove) to 5 (strongly approve), resulting in a summated scale ranging from 3 to 15 ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ). Because scores on the scale were highly skewed (mean = 4.35), the scale's values were converted to logarithms (see Tufté 1974), producing a variable that ranged from 1.10 to 2.71 (mean = 1.36; standard deviation = 0.43).

A positive coefficient on this variable would be consistent with the democratic ambivalence hypothesis because such an effect would mean that people who support political violence also support Chávez. A null or negative effect, in contrast, would be consistent with the converted militant hypothesis. If Chávez were no longer perceived to be a possible leader of political violence, then support for violence and opinion about Chávez would be unrelated. Similarly, if Chávez were viewed as a reformer whose actions could prevent future political violence, then support for violence and opinion about Chávez would be inversely related.

The model included several additional variables. Numerous observers have noted that Chávez drew support from the young, the poor, and the politically unsophisticated (Handelman 2000). Age was defined as age in years (for mean and standard deviation, see appendix). Wealth was based on data concerning whether the respondent owned various household items, such as a television and an automobile. Political sophistication was operationalized as the number of correct answers the respondent gave on a four-item political knowledge battery.<sup>8</sup> Negative effects were expected for age, wealth, and political knowledge. The model also included a control for gender.

Both the converted militant hypothesis and the democratic ambivalence hypothesis presuppose that how Venezuelans see democracy as a form of government is relevant for opinion regarding Chávez. An alternative perspective is that opinion about Chávez hinges on what people think about Venezuela's incumbent political leaders, not what they think about democracy. Three variables were included to account for this possibility. The first is evaluation of President Rafael Caldera (for range see appendix). The next two measure confidence in Congress and political parties. Negative coefficients were expected for each of these variables, because positive affect for Chávez should peak for respondents who are dissatisfied with specific aspects of the status quo.

Table 2 reports logistic regression results. Coefficients for age, wealth, and political knowledge are consistent with the conventional wisdom that Chávez gained support from the young, the poor, and the politically unsophisticated. In contrast, results for the variables measur-

Table 2. Determinants of Positive Affect for Hugo Chávez in 1995:  
Logistic Regression Estimates

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	1.19#	0.70
Age	-0.03***	0.01
Wealth	-0.14**	0.05
Political knowledge	-0.33**	0.11
Gender	-0.40#	0.24
Support for President Caldera	-0.23	0.15
Support for Congress	0.14#	0.07
Support for political parties	-0.09	0.09
Support for democracy	-0.64**	0.24
Support for political violence	0.66*	0.26
Number of cases	566	566
Model chi square	78.22	—

Note: The dependent variable is positive affect for Hugo Chávez. 1 = respondent views Chávez as both personally and nationally influential; 0 = respondent does not view Chávez as both personally and nationally influential.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*  $p < .05$     #  $p < .10$

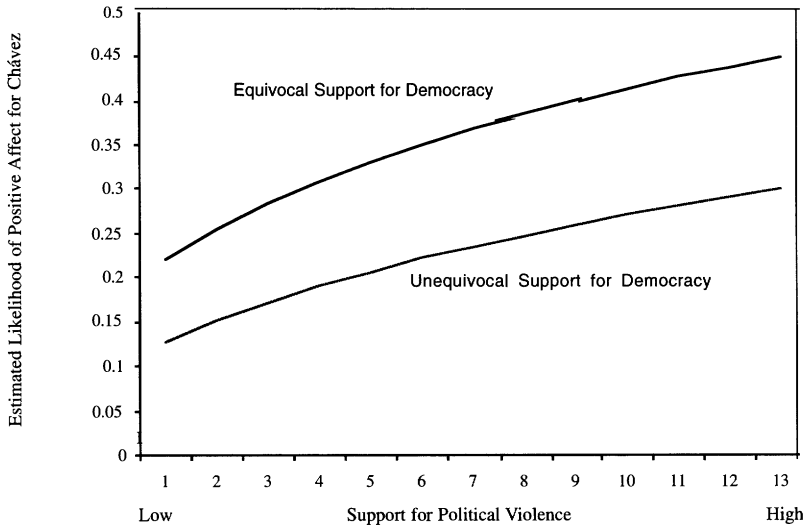
Source: 1995 Venezuela Survey.

ing attitudes toward President Caldera, Congress, and political parties are inconsistent with the hypothesis that these attitudes influenced opinion regarding Chávez.<sup>9</sup>

Support for democracy produced a statistically significant negative coefficient, and support for political violence produced a statistically significant positive coefficient. These results are consistent with the democratic ambivalence hypothesis. The first means that respondents who were ambivalent or negative toward democracy were relatively likely to view Chávez as personally and nationally influential. In short, early Chávez supporters included Venezuelans who were not committed to democracy as a form of government. Similarly, the effect for the political violence variable indicates that among Chávez's early supporters were Venezuelans who viewed political violence favorably.

The magnitude of these effects is depicted in figure 1, which shows the impact of attitudes toward democracy and political violence, with all other variables held at their mean values. The vertical axis is the estimated likelihood that the respondent has positive affect for Chávez, and the horizontal axis is support for political violence. The upper line represents respondents with equivocal or negative views regarding democracy as a form of government, whereas the lower line represents

Figure 1. Impact of Attitudes Toward Democracy and Political Violence on Positive Affect for Hugo Chávez



respondents who expressed unequivocal support for democracy. Thus, the gap between the two lines, which ranges in magnitude from 9 to 15 percentage points, indicates the impact of support for democracy on affect toward Chávez. Each line slopes upward, capturing the variance in opinion about Chávez, about a 20-point swing, that stems from support for political violence.

Figure 1 suggests that Chávez was held in low esteem in 1995 by respondents who valued democracy and opposed political violence. In the lower left corner of the figure, we see that such respondents had only a 10 percent likelihood of identifying Chávez as personally and nationally influential. Looking to the upper right corner of the figure we see, in contrast, that respondents who were ambivalent toward democracy and who supported political violence had a 45 percent likelihood of expressing favorable views of Chávez.

Were it not for Venezuelans who were ambivalent toward democracy, Chávez would have had little support at all in 1995. Thus democratic ambivalence was crucial to Chávez's planned foray into mainstream politics, at least early on. In itself, this result perhaps should not be viewed as surprising. Because Chávez had only recently been released from prison, it is reasonable that Venezuelans who were committed to democracy and who opposed political violence viewed him with disdain. What is not yet clear, however, is what changed between 1995 and 1998, by which time Chávez held the support of a majority of Venezuelan voters.

## SUPPORT FOR CHÁVEZ IN 1998

Chávez won 56.2 percent of the vote in Venezuela's December 1998 presidential election. At most, 40 percent of Venezuelans were ambivalent toward democracy at this time.<sup>10</sup> Chávez therefore could not have secured the presidency solely through democratic ambivalence. Data from 1998 reveal what role, if any, democratic ambivalence played in Chávez's election and what considerations led Venezuelans who supported democracy to vote for him.

The dependent variable here is the respondent's expected vote choice, with data coded 1 for Chávez (48 percent of respondents) and 0 for all other candidates. The leader among opposition candidates was Henrique Salas Romer, with support from 38 percent of respondents. By election day, the opposition to Chávez had coalesced in support of Salas Romer, and he won 40 percent of the actual vote.

The two key independent variables again measure support for democracy as a form of government and support for political protest. The 1998 survey included one indicator of support for democracy, a question that asked respondents, "Which do you prefer, a democracy like ours or a dictatorship?" These data were used to construct a dummy variable that was coded 1 for respondents who expressed unequivocal support for democracy (79.2 percent) and 0 for those who expressed ambivalence or opposition to democracy.

No item in the 1998 survey directly taps attitudes about political violence. Thus, the model includes a measure of participation in protest activity: "In the last three years, have you participated in protests involving blocking of streets?" Data were coded 1 for respondents who participated in the blockage of streets (10.9 percent) and 0 for respondents who did not. This variable was expected to produce a positive coefficient, because citizens who had recently participated in political protests were presumed to be highly discontented with the status quo, suggesting that they would be likely to support Chávez. As in 1995, additional variables included indicators of age, gender, income, support for President Caldera, support for Congress, and support for political parties (see appendix).

The logistic regression results shown in table 3 reveal strong effects for blockage of streets and especially democratic ambivalence. The results, however, also shed light on the additional factors that contributed to Chávez's victory. Chávez fared well among men, the poor, and respondents who disapproved of President Caldera, Congress, and Venezuela's political parties. These results suggest that, to a large extent, the 1998 election was a referendum on the status quo. Chávez was able to win votes from Venezuelans who supported democracy but who were highly disaffected with incumbent officials and practices.

Table 3. Determinants of Intention to Vote for Hugo Chávez in 1998:  
Logistic Regression Estimates

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	2.67***	0.33
Age	0.01	0.00
Wealth	-0.00**	0.00
Gender	-0.62***	0.14
Support for President Caldera	0.31**	0.10
Support for Congress	-0.48***	0.13
Support for political parties	-0.36*	0.13
Support for democracy	-2.25***	0.22
Support for political violence	0.46*	0.22
Number of cases	1,018	—
Model chi square	244.77	—

Note: The dependent variable is Vote Intention in the 1998 presidential election. 1 = respondent expressed intention of voting for Chávez; 0 = respondent expressed intention of voting for another candidate.

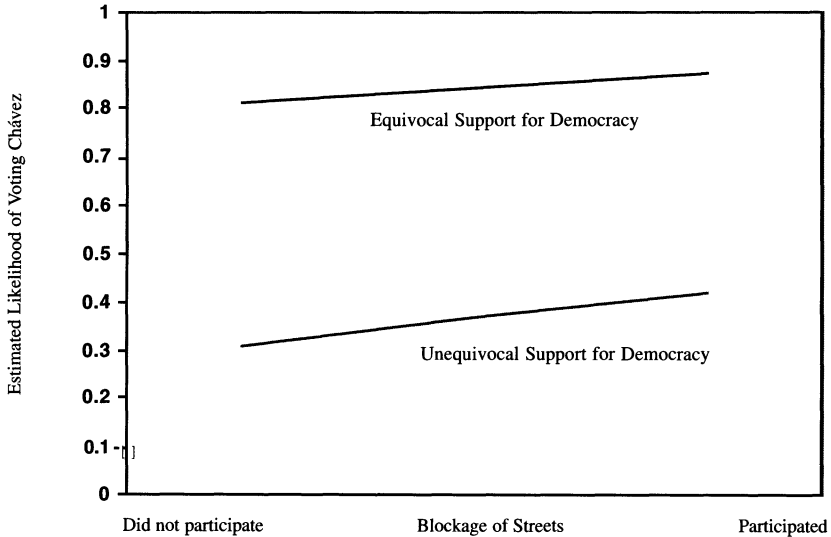
\*\*\* p < .001    \*\* p < .01    \* p < .05    # p < .10

Source: 1998 REDPOL Survey.

Although every predictor except for age produces a significant coefficient in the 1998 vote intention model, the substantive effect of the support for democracy variable should not be understated. In figure 2, the slight upward slope of the lines indicates that respondents who had participated in blocking streets were more likely to back Chávez than were those who had not. What is striking in figure 2, however, is the vast gap separating the lines for equivocal and unequivocal democrats. Respondents who expressed ambivalence regarding democracy are estimated to be more than 80 percent likely to vote for Chávez; in contrast, respondents who support democracy unequivocally have, on average, less than a 40 percent chance of backing Chávez. Even more so than in 1995, democratic ambivalence was crucial for Chávez in 1998.

Chávez won handily in 1998, finishing more than 16 percentage points ahead of Salas Romer. Results from the 1998 survey suggest that the election would have been a dead heat but for the influence of voters who opposed democracy and had participated in protest activities. Among respondents who expressed unequivocal support for democracy and who had not blocked streets (n = 760), only 36.8 percent indicated that they intended to vote for Chávez, a mark slightly below Salas Romer's margin on election day. In contrast, among respondents who either

Figure 2. Impact of Attitudes Toward Democracy and Participation in Blockage of Streets on the Likelihood of Voting for Hugo Chávez in 1998



expressed ambivalence toward democracy or who had blocked streets ( $n = 316$ ), 71.8 percent reported that they intended to vote for Chávez. Moreover, 25 of the 26 respondents who both were ambivalent toward democracy and had blocked streets indicated that they planned to vote for Chávez. Overall, 535 survey respondents intended to vote for Chávez. Of these, 252, or 47 percent, expressed ambivalence toward democracy or indicated that they had blocked streets as part of political protests.

Collectively, the results from 1998 provide corroboration for both the democratic ambivalence hypothesis and the converted militant hypothesis. In 1995, Chávez drew support primarily from Venezuelans who were uncommitted to democracy. By 1998, these same citizens were even more firmly in Chávez's corner, but so were many citizens who supported democracy unequivocally. Chávez won election by assembling a starkly divided electoral coalition. Half of Chávez's supporters were indifferent toward democracy as a form of government; half valued democracy. What these voters shared was disdain for the status quo and a willingness to hand the reins of government to a man who had attempted to topple democracy in Venezuela less than seven years before.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY

In less than a decade, Hugo Chávez underwent a metamorphosis from failed coup leader to successful presidential candidate. The combined effect of numerous factors, especially dissatisfaction with a stagnant economy, the decay of traditional partisan identities, and the perception of rampant corruption in the nation's major political parties, led Venezuelans to elect a political outsider as president in 1998. All of these structural factors could explain the emergence of any antiestablishment candidate; therefore it is not surprising that in the 1998 presidential campaign the central contenders were precisely those candidates not affiliated with the traditional parties. But these factors by themselves are insufficient to account for Chávez's election.

Support for Chávez soared in the last months of the 1998 campaign. Precampaign opinion polls conducted in 1997 gave Chávez a distant fourth place in voters' preferences, but the situation drastically changed by March 1998, when polls began to report that Chávez was the front-runner for the upcoming presidential race (Maingón 1999, 45; Koeneke 2000, 168). This marked the beginning of an irreversible trend of electoral strength and popularity that has persisted throughout the multiple institutional changes Venezuela experienced between 1998 and 2000.

A number of factors can be singled out to explain Chávez's appeal among Venezuelan voters in 1998. Among these are his political platform, promising a profound transformation of the political system (Maingón 1999; Carrasquero and Welsch 2000), and the personal appeal and political astuteness of Chávez himself (López Maya and Lander 2000). But these factors alone do not fully solve the paradox of why Venezuelans elected a man who, a few years earlier, had tried to topple, by violent means, an elected government.

This study has argued that as a matter of logic, the individual Chávez supporter must have resolved this paradox in one of two ways. One option is that the voter concluded that Chávez had undergone a political conversion, transforming him from a violent militant in 1992 to a democratic reformer in 1998. For voters who value democracy, this suggests that the election of Chávez likely constituted an all-or-nothing gamble: with Chávez as president, democracy would be either reformed or dismantled. The second option is that the voter was not committed to democracy as a form of government. People who are sympathetic toward violent militancy also should be sympathetic toward violent militants.

Analysis of data from 1995 and 1998 supports both hypotheses. In 1995, few Venezuelans who valued democracy held Chávez in high esteem. Thus, Chávez built the foundation for his eventual presidential bid nearly exclusively on the strength of support from Venezuelans who were indifferent toward or opposed to democracy. By 1998, democratic

ambivalence was even more crucial for Chávez. Although this portion of the electorate accounted for barely 20 percent of respondents on the 1998 survey, they accounted for just under half of the projected votes for Chávez. But Chávez also appealed to many supporters of democracy in 1998. As outlined in the converted militant hypothesis, these voters were willing to put aside concerns they may have had about Chávez because their frustration with the status quo had grown so severe.

The divided nature of Chávez's electoral coalition warrants emphasis. Most Venezuelans—nearly 70 percent, according to the 1998 survey—support democracy and do not join unconventional political protests. Chávez won the support of just over one-third of this group. The data therefore suggest that Chávez failed to persuade most voters who cherished democracy that he was indeed a converted militant. Chávez won a democratic election in which the advocates of democracy opposed him by a margin of greater than 3:2. He was able to do so because of his strong appeal to Venezuelans who were indifferent toward democracy. These voters provided nearly half of the votes for Chávez. Without their backing, the best Chávez could have achieved would have been a narrow victory over Salas Romer.

Immediately after assuming the presidency, Chávez followed through on his promise and initiated a process of drastic political and institutional transformation. Calling an assembly to draft a new constitution was the first step. In April 1999, there was a referendum to approve calling the constitutional assembly, and in July 1999, an election was held to select assembly delegates. Once selected, delegates quickly drafted a new constitution under Chávez's leadership. In December 1999, a referendum was called to approve the new constitution, which replaced Venezuela's old political institutions and leadership with the nation's "Fifth Republic." Finally, in July 2000—in accord with the new constitution—new elections (or *megaelección*) were held for all elected offices, including the presidency.

Since 1998, the candidates and positions backed by the Chávez government consistently have received support from a majority of voters. Indeed, in July 2000, Chávez was reelected as president with 60.3 percent of the vote, a margin of support slightly superior to the one he obtained in 1998. The elections since 1998, however, also have been characterized by substantial levels of abstention, which may signal an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Chávez's regime. If this is the case, then the dual bases of support identified in this study will be vitally important if Chávez is to succeed as president. Construction of a two-part coalition may be a winning formula in elections, but it hardly seems a winning formula for uncontroversial, trouble-free governance.

Chávez seemingly has positioned his presidency quite precariously. Dramatic—and possibly undemocratic—action appears to be essential if

Chávez is to maintain support among Venezuelans who view him as a source of militant rather than democratic reform. On the other hand, too-drastic action may lose support from citizens who backed Chávez in the hope that he would revitalize Venezuelan democracy.

Signs of the tensions suggested by this dilemma have emerged already. In his first year in office, Chávez took bold steps to amass more power for himself and to appoint military officers to such key government posts as president of the state oil enterprise (Pérez 2001). This aroused domestic and international doubt about the democratic prospects for his administration. Policy debate in the government has been marked by increasing polarization and conflict. In some key areas, such as education, labor autonomy, and freedom of expression, the position of President Chávez and his administration has been vigorously challenged by opposition forces who accuse the president of being authoritarian and autocratic.

Hugo Chávez accomplished with ballots what he could not do with bullets. What remains in question is whether he turned to ballots because he truly has embraced democratic governance, or only because ballots represented his best hope to acquire the power he desired. How this question eventually is answered will have profound implications for democracy in Venezuela.

## **APPENDIX: SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The 1995 survey, the Venezuela Survey, was conducted under the author's supervision in the period January–March 1995 by researchers at the Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales de la Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Caracas. Interviews were conducted in person. The 897 respondents were selected randomly from 101 census segments in 21 Caracas neighborhoods and 30 census segments in 14 Maracaibo neighborhoods. For additional discussion of the survey's design, see Canache 2002.

The 1998 survey is REDPOL-98. The survey was conducted under the auspices of the National Network of Political Culture (composed of researchers from the Universidad Simón Bolívar, Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Derecho Público-Universidad del Zulia, CENDES-Universidad Central de Venezuela, and IESA). The survey was conducted by the public opinion firm DATOS.

Table 4. Definition of Additional Variables

	Definition	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation
1995				
Age	Years	—	35.86	15.14
Wealth	Ownership of household items	0–9	4.52	2.47
Political sophistication	4-item political knowledge battery	—	2.59	1.15
Gender	1 = male 0 = female	—	—	—
Support for President Caldera		0 = very poor– 4 = excellent	2.20	0.84
Support for Congress		0 = no confidence– 6 = a great deal of confidence	2.17	1.89
Support for political parties		0 = no confidence– 6 = a great deal of confidence	1.21	1.63
1998				
Age	Years	18–88	35.90	14.88
Gender	1 = male 0 = female	—	—	—
Income		Bs.15,000– 6,000,000 per month; Income scale divided by Bs. 1,000,000	2.83	2.96
Support for President Caldera		0 = none– 3 = a lot	1.01	0.73
Support for Congress		0 = none– 2 = a lot	0.57	0.60
Support for political parties		0 = none– 2 = a lot	0.46	0.59

## NOTES

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1. Collectively, many of these factors combined to cause a decadelong crisis of legitimacy in Venezuela. For additional discussion of this crisis, see the various papers in Canache and Kulisheck 1998.

2. For example, Douglas Bravo, active in the 1960s and one of the main guerrilla leaders in Venezuela's recent history, reveals that Chávez began interacting with the guerrilla movement and rebel military factions within the Venezuelan armed forces in the early 1980s. In Bravo's account, Chávez's brother, Adán, who was a member of two far-left political organizations (the PRV and Ruptura), facilitated the initial encounter, which sought to organize and coordinate a long-term strategy for a revolutionary insurgency. Chávez continued to meet and coordinate efforts with guerrilla forces until 1991, but eventually he opted for a type of insurgency exclusively centered on military elements (interview in Garrido 1999, 5–40).

3. The alliance also included the Homeland for All (*Patria Para Todos*, PPT), the Movement Toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS), and other smaller leftist groups.

4. Following his election, Chávez worked quickly to turn his campaign rhetoric into political reality. Elections for a Constitutional Assembly were held on July 25, 1999. The outcome gave Chávez's political coalition 121 of the 131 assembly seats. With Chávez's endorsement, the assembly awarded itself sweeping judicial powers, aiming to renovate the country's judicial system. In a bold and controversial move, the assembly voted to dissolve the largely opposition-controlled Congress. On December 15, 1999, the Bolivarian Constitution proposed by the Constitutional Assembly was approved in a national referendum.

5. Some earlier data on Chávez do exist, including surveys conducted immediately after the failed 1992 coup attempt (see Templeton 1995) and in the year following Chávez's release from prison (see López Maya 1998). These data are less useful for present purposes than the data from the 1995 survey. The central question concerns how Chávez constructed a coalition of mass support. Data from 1992 are irrelevant to this question, because the imprisoned Chávez obviously had not yet had the opportunity to develop a base of popular support. Similarly, data obtained in the months after Chávez's release were gathered too soon to permit a fair test of the converted militant hypothesis. At the time the 1995 data were gathered, in contrast, Chávez had spent more than a year attempting to mobilize public opinion. Thus, early 1995 marks an appropriate point for an initial test of the two competing hypotheses under consideration.

6. In modeling the data using a binomial specification for the dependent variable, the choice set is reduced to Chávez versus all other alternates. A dif-

ferent approach would be to use multinomial logistic regression, which would permit an estimate of the unique effects of predictors on selection of Chávez, Pietri, Rangel, and others. Such a model was estimated using Chávez as the contrast category. Results consistent with those reported here were obtained for each paired contrast. Given the consistency of those results, and given that the purpose here is solely to explore hypotheses concerning Chávez (that is, we are not interested in the subsidiary questions, such as why someone chose Prietri rather than Rangel or Lebrún), the binomial specification is appropriate.

7. The correlation between the two items was 0.46, allowing the combination of these items into a two-item measure. Overall, 65 percent of respondents expressed unequivocal support for democracy.

8. Political knowledge is used rather than education because past research has established that the factual knowledge battery provides the best means to measure political sophistication (see, for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). Empirical analyses of the Venezuelan data offer support for this position. First, a model with the knowledge variable outperforms one with education. Second, when both knowledge and education are included as predictors, only the former produces a statistically significant effect.

9. The null results for the variables concerning President Caldera, political parties, and Congress may seem surprising at first glance, but not too much should be read into these findings. Caldera was still relatively new to office when the survey data were gathered. Given that Caldera won office partly by campaigning against political corruption, respondents may have had mixed opinions as to whether Caldera was part of the problem or part of the solution for Venezuelan politics. Regarding Congress and parties, respondents to the 1995 survey viewed Congress and parties so negatively that these items varied only minimally, limiting their possible impact as predictors of opinion about Chávez. Moreover, the two figures named most frequently as being influential in Venezuela, Pietri and Rangel, were highly critical of Venezuela's political system. A respondent who lacked confidence in Venezuela's parties and Congress would not necessarily be more likely to side with Chávez than with another prominent critic, such as Pietri or Rangel.

10. Lagos (2001) reports that 60 percent of Venezuelans expressed unequivocal support for democracy on the 1998 Latinobarometer.

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