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Chavismo, Liberal Democracy, and Radical Democracy

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Abstract

Scholars studying Hugo Chávez and his movement are generally divided into two camps: a liberal one that sees Chavismo as an instance of democratic backsliding and a radical one that upholds Chavismo as the fulfillment of its aspirations for participatory democracy. Boundaries are not fixed, but the two sides generally fail to understand each other's assumptions or to acknowledge each other's criticisms. The result has been a less productive body of scholarly work on both sides.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past six decades, a handful of revolutionary Latin American movements have grabbed international headlines and generated whole libraries of academic research. The most recent of these is Chavismo, named for Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. More than 500 books and nearly as many articles have been written on Chávez and his movement since they first came to public attention in 1992.¹ With the death of Chávez in 2013 due to cancer and the crisis of the movement under his successor, Nicolás Maduro, now seems an opportune moment to assess this body of scholarship. What does it teach us about Chavismo, and what does it teach us more broadly about political science?

Some areas of the literature show a fair amount of consensus. For example, scholars are united in their awareness of Chavismo's early shift to the left (e.g., Cameron & Hershberg 2010, Castañeda 2006, Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Ellner 2009, Levitsky & Roberts 2011, Weyland et al. 2010). Likewise, numerous studies focus on the movement as an instance of populism, seeing this—for better or worse—as one of its defining attributes (Brading 2012; Cannon 2009; de la Torre & Arnson 2013; Hawkins 2009, 2010a, Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

However, in most other areas there is sharp disagreement. Scholars are generally divided into two camps: a liberal democratic one that sees Chavismo as an instance of democratic backsliding, and a radical democratic one that upholds Chavismo as the fulfillment of its aspirations for participatory democracy. Scholars in these two camps rarely engage each other, manifesting a polarization that mirrors the divisions of Venezuelan society since Chavismo came to power. The boundaries between these camps are not absolute. A few individuals position themselves between the two as neutral observers of events (scholars in the liberal camp are most likely to fill this role), and a few radical scholars have strong commitments to liberal ideals that put them at odds with the government. But for the most part, the two sides fail to understand each other's assumptions or to acknowledge each other's criticisms. The result is a less productive body of scholarship on either side.

My goal in this article is not to reconcile the two camps; given their fundamentally opposing assumptions, this seems counterproductive. But in juxtaposing the two perspectives, we can begin to identify their lacunae and fill these gaps. Moreover, the results of this comparison have broader implications. Although the scholarly divide in Venezuela is unusually extreme, the two sides reflect an international divide among political scientists, especially those studying Latin America and other parts of the developing world. The liberal perspective remains dominant, but the radical one has increased its appeal during the global economic crises of the past decade, and it requires scholarly engagement. At the end of this review, I highlight a few of these implications.

This review of scholarship does not provide a general history of Chavismo, which can be had in a variety of sources on the movement and in biographies of Chávez (Jones 2008, López Maya 2005, Marcano & Barrera Tsyka 2007). I try to be as inclusive as possible in what constitutes a work “on Chavismo,” as Chavismo has been covered alongside other cases in many works that are not strictly focused on the movement. I limit the discussion to works having some connection to political science, and thus overlook literature from the other social sciences and the humanities.

THE DIVIDED SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Scholarly work on Chavismo first appeared after 1992, when Chávez and his collaborators attempted a military coup. The first books were analyses by Venezuelans of the coup in the context

¹These numbers are based on a search of the Online Catalog of the Library of Congress using the term “hugo chavez” in the title and keywords, and an online search of EBSCO's Academic Search Premier using the term “hugo chavez” in the title and abstract.

of the larger crisis of the traditional two-party system, known as *puntofijismo*. On the one hand were scholars and pundits who, though aware of the problems with *puntofijismo* tended to be dismissive of Chávez and were unsympathetic to his radical aspirations and tactics (Romero 1994, Tarre Briceño 1994). These writers were critical of the existing two-party system and believed it needed reforming, but they did not see Chávez or his movement as a viable or appropriate solution. On the other hand were scholars and journalists who were sympathetic. They were fascinated by the popular adulation of Chávez and open to his call for wholesale political and economic change. Although some were wary of Chávez's leadership (before the coup, the movement was known only to a handful of civilian activists), they were nonetheless hopeful and treated him with respect, and in some instances embraced the movement (Blanco Muñoz 1998, Zago 1998).

Once Chávez came to power in 1999 and set to work creating a new constitution, the movement began to attract more international attention. At first, scholars were primarily those belonging to an older school for whom *puntofijismo* was a reference point (McCoy & Myers 2004). By about 2003, however, the continuance of Chávez in power and the excitement generated by the government's participatory experiments began attracting a wave of new scholarship that dedicated itself to understanding Chavismo per se. Some of the contributors were old hands who discovered that their country of emphasis had become more interesting to outsiders (Ellner 2009, Ellner & Hellinger 2003, López Maya 2005). But others were graduate students and new PhDs seeking to earn their scholarly stripes, as well as internationally oriented senior scholars who saw Venezuela as an important new case (Smilde & Hellinger 2011). Some of their work focused on Chávez himself in the form of interviews (Dieterich 2004, Harnecker 2005), but much of it focused on the broader movement through innovative fieldwork. Their research involved both quantitative (Hawkins & Hansen 2006, Penfold-Becerra 2007) and qualitative approaches, especially ethnography (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Fernandes 2010, Schiller 2011, Spanakos 2011, Velasco 2015).

Although this new body of scholarship offered a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, its most important division was ideological. Indeed, many other, more scientific divisions were subsumed within a division over basic normative views of democracy: liberal versus radical.

Scholars in the liberal camp adhered to a classic liberal ideology that valued procedural democracy (competitive elections, widespread participation defined primarily in terms of voting, and civil liberties) as the political means best suited to achieving human welfare. Many of these scholars had a liberal vision of economics, although some were moderate social democrats who were critical of neoliberalism. Most espoused positivist notions of scientific method and worked in the mainstream of political science. Together, they saw Chavismo in a mostly negative light, as a case of democratic backsliding or even competitive authoritarianism. They also concentrated on explaining the movement's causes, in the sense of explaining what allowed it to win and consolidate its power. Theories here were divided between rationalist and ideational accounts.

In contrast, scholars in the radical camp generally adhered to a classic socialist (not necessarily Marxist) ideology that mistrusted market institutions in either the state or the economy. These scholars saw procedural democracy as insufficient to ensure political inclusion, although they still accepted the importance of liberal democratic institutions, and emphasized participatory forms of democracy and collective worker ownership in the economy. Many, though not all, were antipositivist and looked with suspicion on mainstream, quantitative methodology. Hence, although some offered modest analyses of the movement's causes, they tended toward descriptions of the movement that celebrated its participatory features or analyzed its potential weaknesses for accomplishing its revolutionary goals. Most of these scholars supported Chavismo and helped constitute the civilian wing of the movement.

The boundaries between these camps were not entirely fixed; a few individuals tried to position themselves between the two as neutral observers of events in Venezuela. Scholars in the liberal camp were most likely to fill this role because of their commitment to scientific objectivity. Furthermore, some radical scholars had strong liberal ideals that eventually put them at odds with the government, which they criticized as authoritarian and unfaithful to its participatory promise (e.g. López Maya & Panzarelli 2013). And a few scholars on the boundary walked this fine line so well that it was difficult to “place” their work (e.g. García-Guadilla 2008). But the two sides generally failed to understand each other’s assumptions or to acknowledge one another’s criticisms.

This state of affairs—a large wave of international scholarship divided into these two camps—persisted until roughly the present, although increasing levels of economic hardship, political repression, and violent crime began to dissuade many scholars from staying in Venezuela for long periods. The result was an unusual volume of scholarship on a single Latin American country, especially one that for years had been the domain of country specialists.

THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

Scholars in the liberal camp are not necessarily dedicated to cataloguing the democratic vices of Chavismo, but they do share a broad acceptance of liberal democratic theory and tend to be critical of the movement. As positivists, they also emphasize the search for causality and offer compelling explanations for Chavismo’s origins and persistence.

Given Chavismo’s putschist background, antagonistic rhetoric, and constitutional manipulation, it is not surprising that some liberal critics found fault with the movement’s democratic credentials from the start. Early scholars labeled it a “hybrid” or “gray zone” democracy (McCoy & Myers 2004), an “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 2003), or a “competitive autocracy” (Corrales 2006). Whether the regime really deserved these labels in its first years was debatable, and not all liberal scholars were willing to accept them. But since roughly 2006, most of these academics agree that the regime has become a competitive authoritarian or electoral authoritarian regime (Corrales & Penfold 2010, Hidalgo 2009, Kornblith 2013, Levitsky & Loxton 2013, Mainwaring 2012).²

The Liberal Critique of Chavismo

The fact that these scholars are critical of Chavismo is not novel; what their writings contribute is precision and detail. Because their critiques draw from a variety of definitions of liberal democracy (cf. Brewer-Carías 2010, Levitsky & Loxton 2013), the criteria shift a bit from one work to another, but together they identify at least five democratic principles that Chavismo governments (under both Chávez and Maduro) have violated.

Elections. First, Chavismo fails to ensure free and fair elections. The problem is not that the government under Chavismo fails to hold elections or that it never allows the opposition to win (some critics charged that the government engaged in outright fraud, a charge I challenge in the next section). The opposition’s victory in the 2015 legislative elections suggests that it is possible for the government to lose. Rather, the problem is that the government engages in practices that clearly, if more subtly, violate electoral fairness and freedom.

²Since Maduro came to power in 2013, some liberal scholars argue that the regime has become fully autocratic (e.g., Corrales 2015).

The government frequently uses changes in the electoral rules to its advantage. Some of these incidents are mild, as when government supporters publicized a partisan “cheat sheet” for the 1999 Constituent Assembly elections even though the election was officially nonpartisan (Brewer-Carías 2010). But some are more serious, as when the government stalled the 2004 presidential recall election for over a year, until it had implemented social funds that allowed it to turn around its public approval ratings (Kornblith 2005). Likewise, in the 2010 legislative election the government implemented questionable reforms, including switching many of the proportional representation seats to first past the post and gerrymandering districts to magnify their rural bias (Ojo Electoral 2010).

The government also violates principles of electoral freedom, especially during and after the 2004 presidential recall election. For this election, it naturalized and registered large numbers of immigrants in order to boost turnout. During and after the election, it allowed the widespread distribution of a list of antigovernment petitioners (the infamous “Lista Tascón” or Maisanta database) that was used to slow down voter registration for the opposition and to fire opponents from government jobs (Hsieh et al. 2009).

Most of these violations of the freeness and fairness of elections happen because of bias within the National Electoral Council (abbreviated CNE in Spanish). Although the CNE was established under the 1999 Constitution as a nonpartisan, professionalized agency, appointments to its governing board were partisan almost from the start, a majority of members being Chávez supporters. The CNE works to ensure the smooth functioning of balloting on election day and to increase public confidence in this process. However, the council often receives criticism for its regulation of campaign activities before elections. International and national observers note the government’s lopsided use of media, the disproportionate application of advertising regulations against the opposition, and the frequent use of state resources to pay for Chavista campaign materials (Carter Center 2005, 2012; European Union Election Observation Mission 2006; Ojo Electoral 2010). In an environment where Chavismo had high levels of support, these instances of bias might not have mattered for practical purposes. But they showed a lack of intent to follow the rules, and when the results became close—as they were for the 2013 presidential by-election, which Maduro won by just 1.5%—they probably affected the outcome.

Civil liberties. Second, liberal critics show that Chavismo routinely violates civil liberties. To be clear, civil liberties were never broadly repressed, although the Maduro government became increasingly uncivil in the two years after it assumed power, and civil liberties under *puntofijismo* were occasionally violated as well. However, a number of civil liberties saw significant reverses under the Chávez government, including the right of association and freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2012).

Some of the most significant setbacks are in media freedom. After the 2002 coup, which much of the private media supported, the government systematically reduced the private media’s space. In 2004, the government passed a media content law that was used to punish broadcasters who criticized the government. In 2007 it revoked the license of the main private television station (RCTV) for its role in the 2002 coup, and in 2013 it used various legal tools to replace the owners of another major broadcaster (Globovisión), as well as the owners of two major print outlets, *El Universal* and the Grupo Capriles. The government made its own entry into the media market by creating several new national and international television and radio stations (TVes, Vive, and teleSUR in television), and by financing dozens of community media stations that were sympathetic to Chavismo (Tanner Hawkins 2003). And throughout this period, the government limited advertising contracts to outlets that supported the government and used its control over imported materials and foreign currency to punish opposition media. Not every private voice was

eliminated from the press, and private television and radio venues remain important players in the media market. But the level of self-censorship in the remaining private outlets is very high, and government media makes no attempt at unbiased coverage (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014, Freedom House 2015).

Separation of powers. The third complaint is that Chavismo eliminates the separation of powers between the branches of government. The case of the ostensibly independent CNE has already been noted. In addition, the pre-2015 legislature routinely used its Chavista supermajorities to grant Chávez and Maduro decree powers for periods of one to two years. But the greatest loss of independence occurred in the judiciary (Canova González et al. 2014, Castaldi 2005, Human Rights Watch 2012, International Bar Association 2011). In 2004, after a controversial Supreme Tribunal ruling exonerated the generals who took part in the 2002 coup against Chávez, the National Assembly passed a law that allowed Chávez to appoint a partisan supermajority to the court. By 2006, the government had fired hundreds of other judges in lower courts as well. The purge was repeated in 2010, when a lame-duck session of the legislature rammed through more hirings and firings of judges. Afterward, the threat of removal and criminal prosecution hung over any judge who dared to rule against the government.

Opposition. Fourth, critics argue that Chavismo creates an uneven playing field. Because this term is a bit vague, I rely on Levitsky & Way's (2010) three criteria to define it: (a) state resources are used to favor the incumbent, (b) opposition parties lack access to media, and (c) legal institutions are captured by the incumbent. The last two criteria have already been discussed. But the first of these—the partisan use of state resources—is a particular problem for Chavismo. For instance, several sources document the politicization of the government's flagship social funds, the *Misiones* (Handlin 2013, Hawkins et al. 2011, Penfold-Becerra 2007). Statistical analyses of site allocations show that the distributions of *Misiones* resources were strongly correlated with the partisan profiles of localities, with core voters and districts receiving disproportionate benefits.

Likewise, a number of sources suggest that the government's participatory initiatives are used as campaign infrastructure. Although evidence of this could be seen in earlier initiatives such as the Bolivarian Circles (Hawkins & Hansen 2006), probably the most prominent instance is the Communal Councils. Starting in 2006 with the Law of Communal Councils, groups of up to 400 households could apply for a charter to establish a Communal Council and receive government development grants. The Communal Councils were designed to be new forms of local, participatory governance open to all citizens, and over the next few years more than 20,000 were created (García-Guadilla 2008). However, interviews with project participants suggest that the Councils often served as local partisan organizations during elections, with participants giving time and resources to proselytize and get out the vote (Handlin 2016, López Maya 2011).

Rule of law. Finally, liberal critics charge that the Chávez government violated or weakened the rule of law. I mean this term in the broadest sense, that of the capacity and willingness of the state to enforce the law equally for all citizens (Méndez et al. 1999, O'Donnell 2001). The rule of law was never especially strong in Venezuela under puntofijismo and declined as the years went by (Cupolo 1998, Karl 1997, Pérez Perdomo 1995), but under Chavismo it declined further in notable ways. The aforementioned politicization of the judiciary and the bureaucracy violated due process and facilitated the growth of corruption (Coronel 2006, Human Rights Watch 2012). This and the state's willingness to intervene in and expropriate private industry, often through dubious legal means, served to weaken property rights. And levels of violent crime skyrocketed—by 2012, Caracas had the second-highest murder rate in the Americas (United Nations Office of Drugs &

Crime 2014). Although Chavistas were willing to overlook some of these violations of the rule of law, the increase in violent crime was a plague that afflicted all citizens and was acknowledged in election campaigns by Chávez himself.

Causal Analysis

The second contribution of liberal scholars to the study of Chavismo is in causal analysis, in the sense of explaining how the movement won and consolidated its power. Two arguments predominate. One is a largely rationalist explanation focusing on the complex of fiscal resources and institutional openings in Venezuela. According to this argument, declining oil resources during the 1980s made it difficult for the traditional parties to maintain distributive social programs, thus costing them their support (Corrales & Penfold 2010, Morgan 2011). The sudden influx of oil revenues after the early 2000s allowed the Chávez government to win the votes of Venezuelans through new social programs and subsidies (Corrales & Penfold 2010, Handlin 2013). At the same time, institutions at the level of the party and the system determined how these resources were used. Clientelistic barriers to entry and top-down internal organizations discouraged the traditional parties from innovating during times of scarcity, and decentralization during the 1980s and 1990s opened the party system to new competitors that made it difficult to craft stable policy coalitions (Morgan 2011). Later, a clever sequencing of institutional reforms by Chavistas (starting especially with constitutional reform) allowed them to take control of the state and isolate would-be opponents (Brewer-Carías 2010). The creation of base-level organizations solidified this process by channeling resources to supporters while mobilizing them into election campaigns (Handlin 2016). Thus, the victory of Chávez and the partial breakdown of liberal democracy can be explained in largely political-economic terms.

A second line of argument emphasizes the importance of ideas, especially normative ideas about democracy (Canache 2002, Canache & Kulisheck 1998, Hawkins 2010a, Seawright 2012). It explains the breakdown of the old party system as a crisis of democratic legitimacy, understood not simply as a failure of the traditional parties to address the material interests of their constituents (a “thin” representational failure) but as a failure to recognize their full rights as democratic citizens (a “thick” representational failure). According to this argument, material constraints still matter. But the failure of *puntofijismo* to provide equality before the law was seen by citizens as evidence of systematic corruption. This failure not only added moral passion to voters’ concerns, turning dissatisfaction into outrage, but determined the qualities they sought in their politicians, including altruism and honesty, and shaped the issues they expected to see addressed, especially regime transformation. Thus, an antisystem dimension of partisan conflict emerged that partially cut across the left–right economic dimension. According to this view, Chávez’s ability to give voice to these concerns and to stand above the political fray, even as corruption and violence deepened, were crucial to maintaining his popular appeal.

Scholars in the liberal camp strive to place their scientific contributions in comparative perspective. Several studies of Chavismo’s origins provide structured, focused comparisons of cases (Morgan 2011, Seawright 2012) or large-N analyses (Hawkins 2010a). Other regional studies of party system breakdown or transformation (Roberts 2015), as well as recent studies on the “left turn” in Latin America (Cameron & Hershberg 2010, Castañeda 2006, Levitsky & Roberts 2011, Weyland et al. 2010) draw on the case of Chavismo. One of the more interesting examples of this comparative thrust is in international relations. Several liberal scholars see democratic backsliding under Chavismo as emblematic of a larger gap within the scholarly and policy community dedicated to democracy promotion (Legler 2007, Martínez Meucci 2012). For decades, this community has studied and built defenses against the sudden breakdown of democracy through coups

and violent revolutions. But the “slow death of democracy” (O’Donnell 2011) under governments that chisel away civil liberties and the quality of elections has not received as much attention. The example of Chavismo, as well as other Latin American movements in recent years, suggests that international organizations lack tools for monitoring and responding to these new challenges.

THE RADICAL PERSPECTIVE

Radical scholars studying Chavismo see it as a new type of democracy in opposition to liberal or procedural forms. Though not explicitly opposed to institutions such as civil liberties and elections, they argue that democracy can only become effective if it is deepened—and they feel that Chavismo is doing this deepening. This deepening requires not only the greater inclusion of poor and excluded sectors in decision making but their remaking into a new “popular” identity that facilitates their autonomy and dignity. For many of these scholars, deepening also means the adoption of a socialist economy, and some argue it requires taking power through charismatic leadership.

Participation

The first thing that all of these scholars advocate (in Venezuela and elsewhere) is making state institutions more participatory. Citizens should extend their influence on government beyond voting, to include routine involvement in government decision making. Admittedly, Chavismo’s initial efforts at participatory democracy were not especially radical. For example, the provisions in the 1999 constitution—the recall of elected officials, and the creation of a “people’s” branch of government through reworking the offices of attorney general and ombudsman—were implemented in other countries a century earlier, although not always at the national level. However, the menu of reforms eventually became quite deep.

The radical turn is most evident in the case of the Communal Councils. Although they incorporated participatory budgeting practices like those developed in Brazil (Avritzer 2009, Goldfrank 2011, Wampler 2009), the intent of the Communal Councils was not to supplement municipal and state governments but to replace them. Communal Councils would become part of a network of “communes” to be governed through internal selection processes under national government tutelage; traditional jurisdictions of parishes, municipalities, and states would be modified or abolished. Critics raised concerns that elections within the Communal Councils would subvert the core liberal democratic principle of “one person, one vote,” and that the central government would use the opacity of these institutions to control them. Critics also presented evidence that Communal Councils were being used as vehicles of patronage and that they were fostering a culture of clientelism (García-Guadilla 2008, Goldfrank 2013, Handlin 2016, Lovera 2008). However, the government pressed forward with its plans. Chávez and then Maduro attempted to implement the new communal system, including initial work on the legal framework and significant shifts in central government funding to the Communal Councils. Efforts were halted only because of opposition by Chavista governors and mayors, who saw the communal system as a threat to their own authority (López Maya 2011).

The Popular Class

Second, most radical scholars share a hope for or a vision of a unified popular class that identifies itself as such and is capable of acting autonomously. Radical scholars are strongly influenced here by Marxism, with its conception of a working class exploited by a capitalist owner-elite. Although the

hope is to end this exploitation, Marxist scholars have long recognized the difficulty of creating a unified working class that identifies itself as such and is capable of pursuing its ostensible class goals (Laclau & Mouffe 2004). Many poor people are in the informal sector and cannot be considered “workers,” and competing identities and interests generally trump class-based ones. The solution is the creation of a “popular class” that bases its identity on a broader category (roughly, “the poor citizenry”). Radical theorists hope that this identity, once created, can facilitate democratic participation and provide this class with a strong, unified voice.

In Venezuela, an emphasis on *el pueblo* in this class-based sense was a notable part of Chávez’s populist rhetoric (Brading 2012, Hawkins 2010a), but it also found a strong echo among radical scholars themselves, as well as movement activists. I do not know of any self-reflective discourse analysis by movement activists and scholars of their own talk, but use of this kind of populist language is evident in most of the sources examined for this review. These take for granted the potential for a popular class and celebrate Chávez’s ability to help it come into being (e.g., Cannon 2009, Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Fernandes 2010, Spanakos 2011).

A Socialist Economy

A third, not so broadly shared goal is the creation of a socialist economy (Ellner 2010, Wilpert 2007, Yaffe 2015). The aspiration is not a Leninist command economy but worker ownership, although a command economy is often seen as a means of achieving the latter. Worker ownership and management are justified both in traditional Marxist terms and in democratic terms, as a way of suffusing social relations with a participatory element. Both the state and the economy must be subjected to democratic principles that grant every individual an equal share in decision making.

Scholars in the radical camp recognize that creating worker ownership has been problematic in Venezuela (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Ellner 2010). This is not necessarily because of economic inefficiencies that result from making profits a collective good, or because coordination problems grow when decisions have to be made consensually. Rather, it is because the goal of worker autonomy can be hard to balance with other interests. Worker interests in a firm sometimes conflict with those of the larger community (workers may be lazy or try to keep profits for themselves). Balancing the interests of workers with those of the community necessitates state intervention. But because state intervention is often authoritarian and inefficient, it may prevent the sought-for emancipation and dignification of the popular class.

Who Should Control the State?

The issue of worker versus state interests brings us to the final distinguishing feature of the radical perspective, captured in two points of debate among radical scholars: the control of the state and the place of charismatic leadership. On one side is the view that power corrupts and that control of the state is always likely to undermine the participatory, emancipatory goals of the radical project. For these scholars, charismatic leadership is risky because it places too much power in the hands of one individual, and undesirable because it enervates the popular class, undermining their unique identity and the capacity to act autonomously (Beasley-Murray 2010, Holloway 2010).

On the other side is the view that control of the state is essential for achieving radical reform. Only by capturing the state can the left overcome its coordination problems and the determined opposition of traditional elites (Bray 2014). For these scholars, charismatic leadership is an essential, manageable ingredient in the realization of radical democracy. Although scholars here come from several theoretical subtraditions, one of the most prominent thinkers is Ernesto Laclau, who, along with Chantal Mouffe, propose a revision of Marxism that could combine liberal and

radical democratic institutions around a socialist project. The chief innovation of their theory is its ideational foundation, emphasizing the communication of new normative ideas over the advance of capitalist technologies as requirements for implementing socialism and radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe 2004). Laclau (1977, 2005) argues that this identity-building process is accomplished through populist discourse, which naturally divides citizens into camps of “the people” and “the elite” while creating the rationale for wholesale institutional transformation. Furthermore, the process can best occur under the guidance of a charismatic leader who embodies the popular identity. Although populist leadership is insufficient to produce this change—the leader also needs to be sympathetic to socialism—it is a necessary step toward achieving a unified popular will.

Venezuelanists in the radical camp are ambivalent about this last set of issues. Most of them recognize the potential for state domination of the popular sector, and they often point to instances of clientelism and subservience to Chávez’s authority (Cannon 2009, Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Ellner 2009, Fernandes 2010, Schiller 2011, Wilpert 2007). That said, nearly all of them are glad that Chavismo is in a position of power and are excited by what the movement has accomplished in terms of wealth redistribution, collective forms of economic production, and participatory governance.³ They argue that none of these changes would have been possible in so short a time without Chávez’s leadership and the control of the state. They see ongoing factionalism and debates within the movement as proof that the side effects of state control can be avoided (see especially the contributions to Ellner 2014). For most of these scholars the situation is one of tension, not one of irreversible decline into authoritarianism.

A few radical critics, however, have spoken out in clearly negative tones about what they see as the slide of Chavismo into autocracy. Though acknowledging and even celebrating the gains of radical democracy, they express grave concerns and sometimes condemnation of the actual practice of participatory democracy they see under Chavismo, including the government’s curtailing of opposition rights and the extreme concentration of power under Chávez (López Maya & Panzarelli 2013, Spanakos 2011).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the radical perspective helps us better identify the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal one. The liberal perspective clearly does a better job of identifying the procedural democratic failings of democracy under Chavismo, with an important exception I discuss. But its causal arguments often neglect the substance and causal impact of Chavismo’s ideas.

Liberal criticisms of procedural democracy under Chavismo are hard to fault. Some radicals try to minimize these shortcomings by exaggerating the flaws of liberal democracies in other countries (e.g., “gerrymandering happens everywhere”) or by arguing that short-term violations of liberal principles are justifiable means of achieving participatory goals. But these are hypocritical admissions of the government’s errors. As Mainwaring (2012) argues trenchantly, regimes cannot be participatory democracies unless they are first democratic, and to be a democracy requires meeting a procedural minimum. It is important to hold Chavismo to a high standard and to gauge its performance with hard data.

The one description of Chavismo that partly misses the mark is the accusation of electoral fraud and the assertion that Chavismo did not represent the majority of Venezuelans in its years under Chávez. This was not a common argument among scholars, but it was heard widely among

³Laclau (2006) himself was open about his admiration and hope for Chavismo, which he saw as the embodiment of the kind of project he had in mind.

Venezuelans on the street and was echoed by a small group of scholars, especially in the 2004 recall election and its aftermath. At the time, opponents were surprised by the government's victory, given its earlier low levels of public approval and the results of exit polls on election day. Scholars sympathetic to the opposition performed statistical analyses, which they alleged showed some kind of tampering involving the new electronic balloting system (Hausmann & Rigobón 2011). Although these analyses were partly refuted by the Carter Center and the Organization of American States, which each gave their seal of approval to the balloting process (Carter Center 2005), many opposition leaders and voters remained unconvinced. The government's continued use of electronic balloting and the CNE's mishandling of demands for transparency stoked their suspicions and played a key role in the opposition's decision to boycott the 2005 legislative elections.

In retrospect, accusations of fraud were a costly diversion for the opposition. Whatever the reality of the recall election (recent studies provide more compelling evidence of fraud; see Delfino & Salas 2011), most international and national observers agree that the balloting process was largely clean in elections held while Chávez was alive (Carter Center 2012, European Union Election Observation Mission 2006, Ojo Electoral 2010). A variety of opinion polls during these elections made clear that Chávez had persistent popular approval and an enormous reservoir of political activism. Accusations of fraud distracted the opposition and international monitors from criticizing more serious problems with the government's conduct during the run-up to elections, and they prevented the opposition from making the partisan investment that it needed to win the support of the urban poor.

A second, more serious gap in the liberal perspective is in terms of causal explanations of Chavismo. Most of them simply do not take Chavismo's ideas very seriously. As mentioned, some studies focus entirely on rationalist explanations, attributing the government's tactics to a cynical, power-maximizing mentality of Chavistas rather than any kind of sincere revolutionary program (Brewer-Carías 2010, Corrales & Penfold 2010, Penfold-Becerra 2007); these accounts focus heavily on the government's ability to provide material benefits to poor voters (Morgan 2011). But even among liberal scholars who are willing to consider the causal impact of ideas, there is relatively little depth or nuance in their analysis of Chávez's ideas or the writings and speaking of the movement's leaders and activists.

An example here is my own work. Although I analyze the words of Chávez to track his populist discourse (Hawkins 2010a), my analysis focuses on his political worldview and not on his explicit Bolivarian/socialist ideology. These data speak to the polarization of Venezuelan politics and much of the partisan behavior of the government (for example, its demonization of the opposition, its targeting of social programs to core supporters, and its willingness to curtail opponents' electoral rights). But they speak less convincingly to the government's specific choices of economic development policies or its international politics. For instance, Chávez's populist discourse cannot explain his support for leftist authoritarian regimes or his pursuit of the Bolivarian dream in Latin America (the notion of a politically unified Latin American state). These choices depend on his adoption of socialism and his reverence for Venezuela's 19th-century liberators. Liberal scholars have made tentative steps in this direction with explanations for Chavismo's international policies (Corrales & Romero 2012), but they could go much farther as they seek to understand the movement's domestic behavior.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE RADICAL PERSPECTIVE

The radical perspective has at least three strengths that serve as potential antidotes to the weaknesses of the liberal perspective. First, radical scholars feel freer to acknowledge the prior

weaknesses of *puntofijismo*, including its tendency to perpetuate economic inequality and violate the rule of law. Their solutions for these may be problematic, but radical scholars were willing and able to acknowledge that something was seriously wrong from an early date (Hellinger 1991), and they maintained this line of argument throughout Chávez's time in power (Ellner 2009). Several liberal scholars made similar, important criticisms in the decade before Chávez's emergence (McCoy et al. 1995), but after the accession of Chávez their criticisms of *puntofijismo* became muted.

Second, radical scholars studying *Chavismo* are more willing to bring the study of the movement's ideas into their analyses. Indeed, many of their works are expositions of these ideas and their policy implications. Works in this category are too numerous to cover here (for a small sampling, see Ellner 2014), and far too many of them are statements of general theory rather than empirical explorations of what *Chavistas* actually say and do. But the best ones are useful and detailed, providing rich data for scholars interested in understanding the nuances of 21st-century socialism.

The third strength of the radical scholarship is its empirical richness. The best ethnographies of *Chavismo* have all been produced by radical scholars (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Fernandes 2010, Purcell 2013, Schiller 2011, Yaffe 2015; for exceptions outside the radical camp, see García-Guadilla 2008, Handlin 2016, Hawkins 2010a, López Maya 2011). This is a serious deficiency of the liberal camp, which often relies on bird's-eye views of the movement to make its judgments. There are reasons for this empirical shortcoming in the liberal camp, including the unwillingness of the Chávez government to grant scholars access to data. But these excuses can only go so far; most site directors and ordinary *Chavistas* were receptive to interviews and surveys, including a few (but not all) high-level officials. Radical scholars have simply proven more willing to deploy traditional qualitative and ethnographic approaches, and they use them to impressive effect.

This strength, however, leads directly to the first weakness of the radical perspective: methodological rigor. Most radical scholars are unwilling to use opposing cases and to extract information with real policy impact. Many of their ethnographic studies are celebrations of the movement: descriptive efforts to reveal the thoughts and experiences of participants in the government's campaigns and associated neighborhood organizations. Though riveting, their narratives select on the dependent variable, analyzing only cases of success. Furthermore, they often select on key independent variables as well, looking only at *Chavista* activists and ignoring important cases of civil society and political activism among members of the opposition. Admittedly, qualitative method does not *require* variation in dependent variable or independent variables in the same way that quantitative method does; its requirements depend on whether the purpose is theory building or theory testing. And when testing theory, the choice of qualitative test depends on whether the argument involves a set of necessary, sufficient, or facilitating cases (Goertz & Mahoney 2012). But in practice, the lack of contrasting cases in radical studies not only sends a clear political message but also prevents these studies from saying anything of real causal significance or providing policy guidance. The government's key initiatives have temporarily activated large numbers of citizens, but most of this participation is not permanent and fails to go beyond a core of community activists (Hawkins 2010b, Hawkins & Hansen 2006). Radical scholars will not know how to activate bystanders until they go beyond narratives and attempt to address causal arguments systematically. Again, this is not to say that narratives are unworthy of our scholarly attention, only that many radical scholars could be doing more with their research. (For an exception, see Hetland's 2014 comparative study of participatory budgeting in opposition municipalities.)

The second weakness of the radical perspective is its failure to clarify the relationship of radical democracy to liberal or procedural democracy. Because radical scholars focus so much on the new participatory institutions and increasingly active civil society they want to create, they say little about the liberal institutions that are still needed or how these institutions could most appropriately

interact with new participatory ones to create a stable, democratic regime. Thus, they struggle to respond to declines in the rule of law or government repression of dissident Chavistas.

For example, it is not clear how can we ensure access to information and freedom of expression under a system of “popular” media. From the radical perspective, market-based models of media are suspect solutions because of their top-down organization and for-profit basis, not to mention their opposition to the revolutionary project. Using this line of argument, the government has punished opposition media and created a state-owned version that is faithful to the revolution and available to the poor. But the result is a system where information critical of the government is hard to obtain and political discussion is limited to a narrow band of viewpoints—an environment that facilitates corruption and impoverishes participation. Likewise, radical theorists fail to make clear if voting is merely an affirmatory act or a means of competitive selection. Consequently, many participatory institutions, such as the Communal Councils, have not really been designed to ensure that there is competition for leadership positions or that citizens regularly turn out and vote on internal decisions (if this active participation is even feasible in the long term). This lack of attention to mechanisms of competitive selection makes it easier for these institutions to be coopted by the state and thus lose their participatory qualities.

A third weakness of the radical perspective is that scholars in this camp are not very aware of the limitations of populist discourse, either for political or scholarly debate. Radical scholars are well aware of the impact of ideas on politics generally. However, much of their push to build a popular, revolutionary identity is made uncritically, without concern for the nature of the ideas that lead to this identity shift or a change in hegemony.

The most innovative work here has clearly been undertaken by Laclau (2005), who refines the concept of populist discourse and makes a specific argument for its centrality in the revolutionary transformation. However, his approach poses a false dichotomy between a pragmatic politics of differences, which is incapable of revolutionary reform, and a Manichaean politics of hegemony. Multiple scholars suggest the possibility of alternative forms of redemptive discourse that are equally capable of invigorating politics and inspiring change. Perhaps the clearest alternative is pluralism, which celebrates a form of democratic citizenship defined in more inclusive terms (Hawkins 2009, Ochoa Espejo 2011, O'Donnell 1979, Plattner 2010). In short, populism is not the only choice.

Nor does it appear that populism is always the right choice. The main problem that populism poses for radical democracy is its Manichaean outlook. This outlook leads followers to mistrust dissent and justifies the repression of competing voices. Populists may talk about celebrating differences of opinion, but these differences are only permissible among those identified as members of “the people.” When combined with the worship of a charismatic leader, the outlook is devastating for democratic participation because it deprives it of its foundations in agency and choice.

Unfortunately, many scholars in the radical camp, whether or not they agree with Laclau's work, are in the strong grip of populism's Manichaean outlook. They imagine a popular will united around the revolutionary cause, struggling against a capitalist elite that has selfishly divided and repressed the people. Any means, including scholarly ones, must be bent to serve this higher cause. The question is whether this populist discourse is generating better theory and policy. My sense is that it is largely an impediment to scholarship, even the scholarship of the radical cause. Redemptive discourses are not conducive to cool-headed, analytical thinking. Populist discourse in particular is harmful because it makes radical scholars ignore insights from liberal, mainstream scholars, such as the well-developed literatures on pluralism and democratic participation that could be informing their debates about how to mobilize the popular sector and make participatory democracy more effective. Indeed, the risk I take in writing this article is that I will be disregarded for questioning the radical cause.

CONCLUSION

The sharp divide in the study of Chavismo has had negative consequences for the theories and methods of each side. Although the liberal camp enjoys the benefits of a standard of scientific objectivity that allows it to study Chavismo more dispassionately, it suffers occasional biases in its depictions of the movement and employs causal arguments that do not fully engage the movement's substance. The radical camp generates a richer array of data and is freer to acknowledge the weaknesses of the old party system and the successes of Chavismo, but it minimizes Chavismo's violations of democratic procedure, and it frequently rejects the scientific tools that could make its revolutionary program more viable.

What are the lessons of this division for political science more broadly? Here I direct my comments to scholars in the liberal camp, who are more likely to be reading this journal. One lesson for political scientists who do not live in polarized societies such as Venezuela is that they should treat scholars who reside in these settings with more compassion and admiration. Scholars who have not lived in these situations have a hard time understanding the anger and frustration of their Venezuelan colleagues, and they sometimes dismiss their complaints as rants, or are surprised when Venezuelan scholars let their emotions show in their work. It is true that our scholarship is more likely to be taken seriously when we keep our cool, but peer reviewers and colleagues need to realize that living in a polarized society for 17 years takes an emotional toll, even without the problems of violent crime and economic turmoil that Venezuelans experience. The fact that scholarly conversations proceed at all in Venezuela is miraculous. Moreover, it is hard to foresee when similar problems may emerge in our own societies, just as it was hard to foresee them in Venezuela three decades ago.

The debate over Chavismo raises a second, uncomfortable issue for liberal scholarship. Liberal scholars have persuasively argued that democracy should be the "only game in town" and that a market economy is better than a command economy at achieving economic development. However, liberal scholars have still not provided a practical formula for creating these institutions. Liberal democracy and market economics both depend on a relatively balanced distribution of income and a state capable of providing the rule of law and other public goods (Acemoglu & Robinson 2013, Dahl 1991, North & Thomas 1973, O'Donnell 2001). These conditions are hard to create, and weaknesses in either set of institutions may not be self-correcting. The Venezuelan case pre-Chávez reminds us that liberal democracy can lock in place a dysfunctional economy and poor democratic governance. The country enjoyed significant successes in the first years of *puntofijismo* in areas such as health, literacy, income, and democratic participation, but oil corrupted the state and the traditional parties so thoroughly that further change appeared impossible. Liberal scholars studying Venezuela at the time suggested a variety of institutional fixes, most of which ended up not working. Consequently, the radical perspective became an enticing option.

This is not to argue against either liberal democracy or capitalism, only to point out that liberal scholars still lack a blueprint for bringing about improved democratic governance. This is a task worthy of our attention. It requires greater engagement with policy makers and greater attention to both material constraints and ideas.

NOTE ADDED IN PROOF

Events move faster than print. By early March 2016, the Chavista-controlled Constitutional Court had granted decree powers to President Maduro while rejecting the National Assembly's power to subpoena members of the judiciary or electoral commission. The National Assembly was effectively sidelined. The government had apparently shifted to something fully autocratic.

What this transformation of Chavismo means for scholars is still unclear. Concerning the scholarly divide outlined here, not much will change. Many liberals will argue that the slide to autocracy was inevitable, written into the DNA of radical democracy, while radicals who acknowledge the regime's decline will look to other factors, such as the continued overreliance on oil exports or the failed leadership of Maduro. Neither side is likely to acknowledge its weaknesses.

Radical theorists are well intentioned but have not yet created a workable formula for participatory democracy that respects liberal principles; furthermore, socialism still appears to be unfeasible without windfall rents. Yet liberal triumphalism will not by itself provide practical solutions to Venezuela's longstanding problems of corruption and rentier capitalism. Creating full equality before the law, including the protection of property rights, is vital for Venezuela and other developing countries, but the political blueprint for achieving these goals is far from clear.

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