
Grassroots Participation in Defense of Dictatorship: Venezuela's Communal Councils and the Future of Participatory Democracy in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

With Venezuela's Chavista political movement battling to keep its grassroots participatory experiments alive amid a cataclysmic economic depression, we have a new crucial case for assessing the evolution and continuation of participatory institutions under left-wing populist governments. Based on original recent survey data, we marshal evidence to show that the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela's (PSUV) use of grassroots participation to defend the Maduro regime has weakened the quality of community-level participation, just as it may have lengthened the life-span of Chavismo's most important and expansive

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participatory institution, the Communal Councils—the main phenomenon we document here. The continuation of the Councils, despite a massive economic contraction, defies expectations that the groups would disappear when conditions became considerably less favorable than during the economic boom that existed during their 2006-2008 launch. It also raises crucial questions about the power politics dimensions of grassroots-level mobilization, an aspect of participatory democracy that scholars have too often neglected.

INTRODUCTION

The future of *Chavismo*, the left-wing political movement in Venezuela created by populist former President Hugo Chávez, has never been more uncertain. The movement's current leader is the embattled President Nicolás Maduro, an experienced but unimaginative politician who has clung to power for six years. A former congressman, foreign minister, and Vice President, Maduro became interim President after the then-cancer-stricken Chávez named him his successor in December 2013. It bears underscoring that Maduro owes his *Chavista* movement legitimacy to this personal appointment by Chávez, a figure whose legacy between that between 40-50 percent of Venezuelans consider positive, according to poll data from 2017 and 2018.¹

To be sure, Maduro cannot draw on any democratic or economic sources of legitimacy. Maduro has used fraudulent electoral processes and executive power grabs to block the opposition's Constitutional proposals for democratic change while relying on repression to persecute regime opponents. This turn toward hard authoritarian rule sped up amid a cataclysmic economic crisis. As a result of Maduro's failed leadership (with some recent help from U.S. economic sanctions), Venezuela's gross domestic product contracted by over 50 percent from 2015 to 2018, and the World Bank estimated a 25-percent contraction for 2019.²

As Maduro led the country into an economic abyss and worked to turn the political system into a dictatorship, Venezuela's crisis metastasized into a regional humanitarian crisis. Heavy migration flows (over three million since 2015) now tax countries in South America, Central America, and Caribbean, while in the United States, Venezuelans constituted the largest applicant pool of asylum petitioners in 2017 and 2018.³ Meanwhile, in Venezuela, over 90 percent of the population does not have sufficient income to cover basic costs of living, while the collapse of public services—the country experienced five nationwide blackouts in March 2019 alone—has roiled the population and left the public welfare system on the verge of ruin.⁴

Amid these deeply destabilizing changes, Maduro's persistence in power has represented the paradoxical state of affairs for *Chavismo*. Maduro symbolizes *Chavismo's* trouble-ridden future as well as its resilience. His ability to withstand the pressures of the economic crisis, international diplomatic isolation, and harsh economic sanctions has confounded observers. Why has Maduro survived?

The top-down factors are clear. Controlling an ideologically loyal and corrupt military and running an oil-rich economy supported by China and Russia helps keep a kleptocratic system going. It also helps that Maduro has access to sources of illegal finance from drug trafficking, wields a powerful state communications apparatus, and has concentrated on dividing and repressing the opposition. The bottom-up factors that contribute to Maduro's resilience are less well understood. According to More Consulting, a Caracas-based polling firm, from January 2017 to March 2019, approval ratings for Maduro's Presidency swung between 20 and 40 percent, averaging 31.7 percent over this period.⁵ This raises the crucial question of why support for an incompetent dictator did not evaporate.

We argue that, despite extreme state fragility and the *Chavista* political movement's decline, a part of *Chavismo's* governing platform is central to the story behind Maduro's ability to secure core support. The chapter of the story we unpack here has been taking place at the grassroots level. According to fresh survey data we report on here, the Communal Councils, a *Chavista* institution for grassroots participation once thought to be obsolete, has been helping Maduro secure this support.

A Belated Critical Debate: Participatory Democracy and Power Politics

While representatives of Latin America's Pink Tide—the pattern of left-wing-tinged political change
 between 1999 and roughly 2014—have claimed a range of achievements from poverty reduction to the expansion of indigenous cultural rights, perhaps no achievement has been touted more by sympathetic commentators than the expansion of local participatory democracy. And no country's experience with participatory democracy has generated more controversy than that of Venezuela.

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With *Chavismo* facing unprecedented political and economic crises,

many scholars would have expected the Communal Councils (CCs), the movement's most important and expansive participatory experiment, to have receded into the revolutionary sunset years ago. To the contrary, as we detail below, they remain alive and well. Moreover, they play an important, though under-acknowledged role in preserving Maduro's power. The mere continuation of the CCs—200 to 400 family-sized block-level groups first created in 2006—amid the shocks of an unprecedented economic depression is noteworthy. The CCs' endurance is key to understanding what has helped *Chavismo* maintain grassroots-level support. Though there is some evidence that participation has decreased over the last several years, involvement in the groups is still relatively high. This has allowed the CCs to play a critical role in sustaining the Maduro government over the past five years.

A Party Lens for Participatory Institutions

How did grassroots participation live on as a relevant space for *Chavismo's* efforts to penetrate the population? What about the Councils has made them durable—so far—through thick and thin? What does the story of the Councils' continuation mean for *Chavismo's* survival and future as a left-wing political movement, for a broader understanding of the role of participatory institutions in Latin America's once-dominant Left Turn, and the relationship between grassroots power and state power? These are some of the questions we seek to answer as we analyze new field data and its implications.

We first address the empirical puzzle of Council endurance with fresh data from the field. Next, we offer a partisan politics-driven framework for understanding the conditions under which participatory institutions serve the ends of deepening democracy and centering the grassroots, and when they operate in the service of populist authoritarians—as in the case of Venezuela today. We illustrate this framework through a look at the historical development and changing political character of Venezuela's CCs. Finally, we discuss this story's broader implications and the uncertain future of participatory democracy in Latin America.

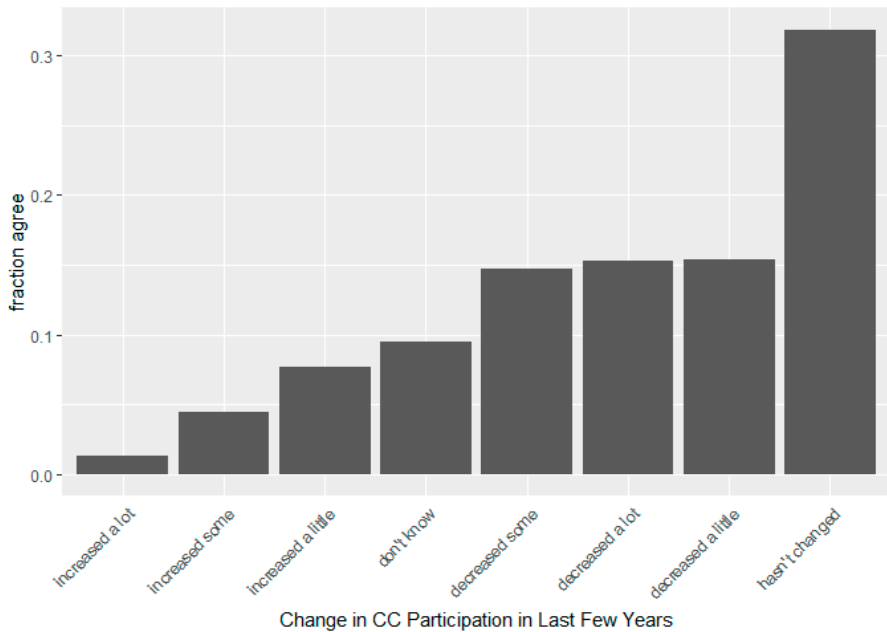
EXPLAINING THE COMMUNAL COUNCIL'S SUPRISING ENDURANCE

Council Continuation

Results from a nationally representative survey of Venezuelan adults carried out by one of the authors (Abbott) in late 2018 suggest that participation in CCs has indeed decreased in the last three years. Figure 1 shows

that 45 percent of Venezuelans believe CC participation has decreased over the last several years, while 32 percent believe participation has not changed, and only 13 percent believe participation has increased.⁶

Figure 1: Change in Levels of Communal Council Participation

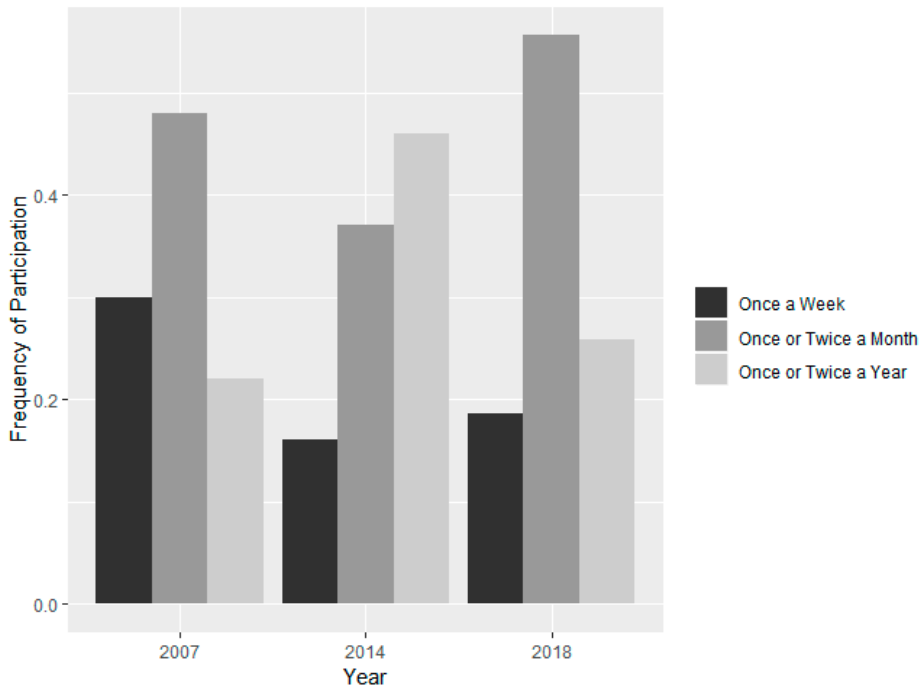


Note: Author's calculation, based on a nationally-representative original survey of 1,135 Venezuelans in late 2018.

Not surprisingly, factors related to the economic crisis, such as lack of financing and services provided by the CCs, are by far the most important reasons given by Venezuelans to explain why participation has decreased. In fact, 50 percent responded that lack of financing or lack of services is the reason participation has declined. This provides evidence that, beginning in 2014, Venezuela's economic crisis indeed had a negative impact on CC participation. Nonetheless, over 50 percent of Venezuelans reported that CC participation has not decreased over the past several years, and 62 percent of respondents who reported ever participating in their local CC reported that they still participated in late 2018. Crucially, we estimate that around 31 percent of the adult Venezuelan population participated in CCs as of 2018, a figure only slightly lower than 2014 levels. Additionally, as Figure 2 demonstrates, if anything, the frequency at which individuals participate in CC activities *increased* since the beginning of Venezuela's economic crisis in 2014. This is far from the virtual disappearance of the

CCs predicted by some notable pieces of scholarship.⁷

Figure 2: Frequency of Communal Council Participation



Note: Author's calculations. 2007 and 2014 data from LAPOP Americas Barometer (cp14).⁸ 2018 data from author's original survey of 1037 Communal Council participants. Question wording identical for each year.

Defending the Regime

The CCs have often been used to critique the Bolivarian government from within the ranks of *Chavismo*. Indeed, a range of leftist critics of the Maduro government have invoked the central role President Chávez assigned the Councils—and the Communes, which are higher-level decision-making bodies composed of at least 5 CCs—in the construction of Venezuelan Socialism to argue that the revolution under Maduro has become bureaucratized and corrupted since Chávez's death.⁹ There have also been high-profile clashes between the government and grassroots activists pushing for a greater role of the CCs and Communes in Venezuelan political life. In one case, this resulted in the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) stealing a mayoral election from a well-respected Communal Leader.¹⁰ On the whole, however, these have been isolated incidents, and the vast majority of Maduro's critics from the

ranks of grassroots CC leaders have rallied to his defense during the recent constitutional crisis.

While the CCs and Communes have opened up spaces for internal critique within *Chavismo*, the pressure they have applied on Maduro is far outweighed by their central role in sustaining his government during Venezuela's economic and political crises. This highlights the darker side of grassroots participatory institutions closely linked to the ruling party: thanks in no small part to the CCs, the Venezuelan government has maintained a loyal base of support that has been crucial in mobilizing the population for dubious elections, such as the presidential vote in 2018.

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A former chair of the Presidential Commission on Popular Power, tasked with overseeing the administration of the CCs at the national level, explained that the Bolivarian Revolution is sustained by a "solid, consolidated nucleus" of core supporters, and that the CCs were "a critical organization in developing the revolutionary social fabric that exists today." He continued, "Without doubt, the CCs provided the foundation" for the consolidation of *Chavismo's* core base of support.¹¹ This base, which local polling surveys estimate constituted around 20 percent of the Venezuelan population in early 2018, provided the majority of votes received by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in the elections of 2017 and 2018.¹²

Further, the CCs have played a critical role during Venezuela's recent economic crisis in helping the government maintain a system of monthly food support that has reached a large majority of the population. Without this system—known by its Spanish acronym, CLAP—the government could not have minimized major disturbances in popular sectors so successfully over the past five years. One government official explained that without the grassroots *Chavista* networks created by the CCs, "it would have been impossible to imagine an organization like the CLAP, which has been fundamental not only in maintaining the revolution in power, but also in ensuring large numbers of Venezuelans haven't died of hunger."¹³ Local networks created by the CCs have provided the grassroots infrastructure needed to ensure that monthly food boxes actually reach communities around the country.

How Have the Councils Held on for So Long?

Contrary to scholarly expectations, the CCs neither disappeared during lean economic times nor became a serious political liability for the Maduro government. The CCs are not obsolete; they remain useful and necessary to *Chavismo*. Confirming fears that politically motivated targeting of benefits to regime supporters would become the dominant pattern, CCs have been central to the government's survival amid unprecedented political and economic crises.¹⁴ Three primary factors help explain this outcome.

First, despite the fact that state officials who promote the Councils commonly use pro-Bolivarian Revolution rhetoric when helping form the groups, the situation is different on the ground. Councils are not neces-

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sarily ideologically soaked spaces where only pro-regime behavior takes place.¹⁵

This allows *Chavistas* with distinct and sometimes contradictory conceptions of the Bolivarian revolution to work together. Figure 3 provides a sense of the vast range of understandings *Chavistas* hold regarding the purpose of the CCs. Some view the Councils as primarily non-ideological spaces intended to solve community problems or to obtain more resources for the

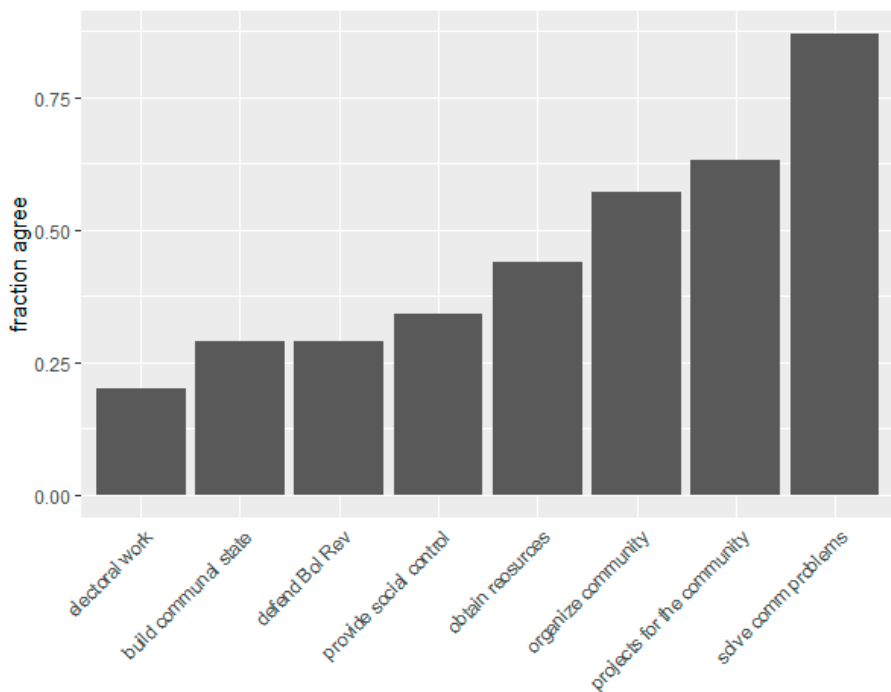
community. Others understand them in highly political terms, believing the purpose of the Councils is to win votes, to defend the revolution against opposition attacks, or to serve as the foundation for a fundamental transformation of the Venezuelan state.

This flexibility allows the Councils to absorb important political differences that have produced damaging internal tensions in other more ideologically rigid *Chavista* organizations, including the PSUV itself. It also allows the Councils to weather economic and political shocks more effectively than other *Chavista* mass organizations by providing a range of substitute motivations for participation when political or economic conditions undermine a given participatory incentive. For example, if the Councils were purely non-ideological vehicles for distributing resources to local communities, most participants would lose interest in participating during lean economic times when Council budgets shrink. While there is some evidence, discussed above, that shrinking budgets did negatively

impact participation, the existence of alternative motivations to ideology for participation helped to mitigate this decline.

Alternatively, if the Councils were simply a cynical attempt by the PSUV to get out the vote during election cycles, individuals might simply lose motivation to participate when the party's electoral fortunes declined. This is where the diverse origins of the Councils come into play. When political and economic conditions have threatened to undermine certain groups' motivation to participate, damage was mitigated by participants' alternative motivations to participate.

Figure 3: Functions of the Communal Councils

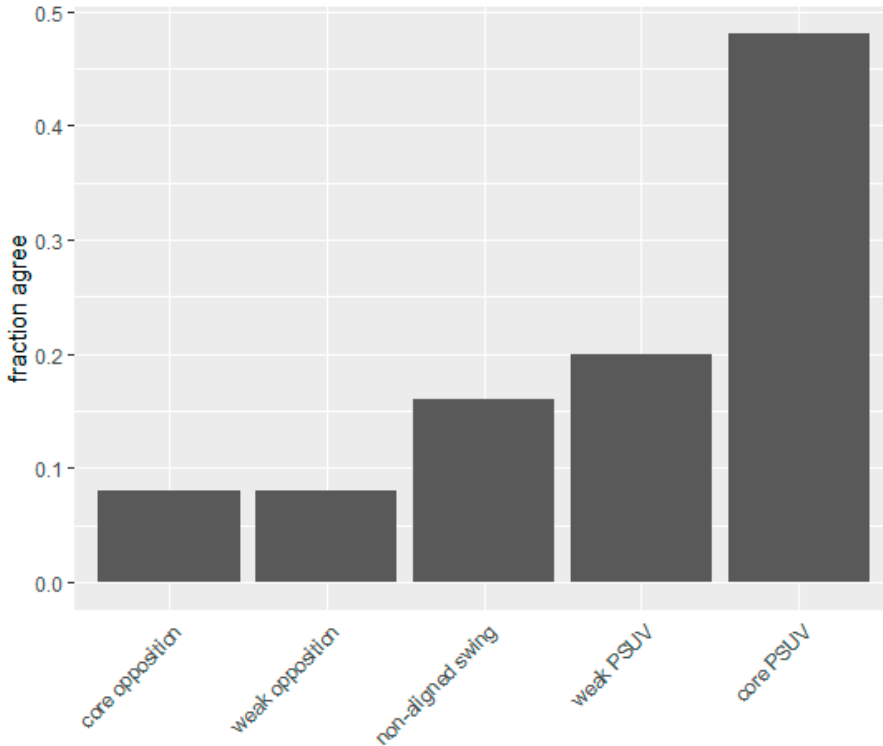


Note: Author's calculation, based on an original survey of 1078 CC participants in late 2018. These figures include only responses from respondents who reported being members of the PSUV. Multiple-choice question.

Also, as Figure 4 shows, the ideological flexibility of the Councils allows for diverse political participation that, while heavily skewed toward *Chavistas*, nonetheless reflects the whole Venezuelan political spectrum. Participants can thus view the Councils as community organizations that, while imbued with some partisan characteristics, transcend partisan politics by serving a role similar to that of traditional neighborhood associations.

This helps to explain why over 70 percent of Venezuelans in a 2011 survey reported that the CCs are the key institutions responsible for resolving problems in their communities, and why in December 2018 over 60 percent of Venezuelans reported that CCs benefit the whole community and not just members of the PSUV.¹⁶

Figure 4: Communal Council Participants by Voter Group



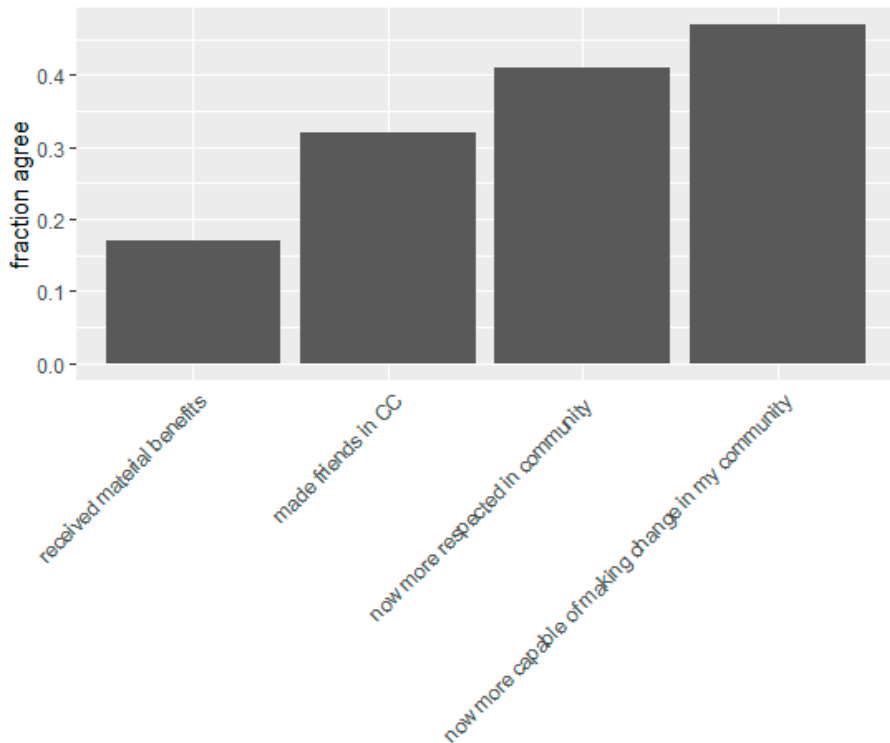
Note: Author's calculation, based on an original survey of 1078 CC participants in late 2018. Multiple-choice question.

Another critical factor in sustaining participation in CCs beyond the commodities boom and Chávez's popularity is the range of non-material benefits the Councils offer participants that other mass *Chavista* organizations do not. If CCs only offered material benefits, we would expect participation to decrease significantly as the financing for CC projects decreased. However, if participants received meaningful benefits regardless of financing levels, we would expect their participation to continue even as their Council's resources decreased. Our survey indicates that CCs offer significant benefits beyond the material. Over 50 percent of CC participants reported that a substantial part of their social life takes place

within their Communal Council. Over 60 percent reported that their CC participation is an important part of their identity and that they are more respected in their community thanks to CC participation. In addition, over 80 percent reported that CC participation allows them to be more informed about what is going on in their community.

Not only do CC participants report that they obtain significant non-material benefits from their CC work, they also value those benefits highly compared to material benefits they receive through CC participation. As shown in Figure 5, among CC participants who reported their opinion of the PSUV improved as a result of CC participation, the percentage who credited their improved opinion of the party to receiving material benefits is dramatically lower than the percentages who pointed to non-material benefits, such as gaining new friends and feeling more respected in their community. Consequently, even if the level of material benefits decreases, participants may still benefit significantly from non-material benefits, and their incentive to participate will endure.

Figure 5: Reasons Why Attitude Toward PSUV Improved after Communal Council Participation



Note: Author's calculation, based on an original survey of 1078 CC participants in late 2018. Multiple-choice question.

Finally, Venezuela's increasingly dire economic crisis has played a role in maintaining significant levels of CC participation. The increasingly severe lack of access to food, water, and other basic services during the crisis appears to have created a survival mentality. For example, a crucial data point from our survey is that 45 percent of the Venezuelans who reported an increase in CC participation credited the increase to a lack of services. The hypothesis that Venezuelans appear more likely to turn to any available avenue appears to be confirmed as the CCs represent one of the few remaining avenues.

Further, the percentage of CC projects approved related to food provision increased from 4 percent in 2009 to nearly 15 percent in 2018, and the percentage of approved projects related to water provision increased from 5 percent in 2009 to 12 percent in 2018. Finally, the percentage of CC participants active in a food committee increased from 0 percent in 2009 to nearly 20 percent in 2018, making food committees the most popular of all CC committees in 2018.¹⁷

THE LEFT, STATE POWER, AND PARTY-GRASSROOTS RELATIONS

To take stock of the broader implications of the CCs' endurance for the future of the Left, populist authoritarianism, and participatory democracy in Latin America, we first have to understand the various ways in which political parties and participatory institutions interact. This relationship plays a major role in determining whether a participatory institution deepens democracy and expands political inclusion, or devolves into a cynically deployed tool of populist autocrats. The evolving relationship between the PSUV and CCs sheds important light on this question, with unsettling implications for the future of participatory democracy in Latin America.

We argue that the most constructive role participatory institutions can play in the political life of a society is to institutionalize the direct participation of grassroots voices in political decision making. This requires: 1) mobilization of significant degrees of grassroots-level participation, and 2) the full and equal participation of voices from across the political spectrum and from all socioeconomic strata. When these two requirements are satisfied, participatory institutions have the potential to empower historically marginalized communities, rejuvenate local democracy, and strengthen representative institutions by infusing them with civic vitality. Whether these conditions are met depends on how political parties structure their relationships to participatory institutions.

Models of Party-Participatory Relations

There are three basic models through which political parties interact with participatory institutions. We contend that the model that predominates in a party's strategic thinking will strongly affect the quality of grassroots participation and political representation that follows. The first is the highly strategic "vanguardist" model. This model employs participatory institutions as direct instruments of the party in order to mobilize supporters and grow the party's electoral base. Participatory institutions are strictly instrumental: they exist to defend the party during key moments or to consolidate the party's political hegemony. This often results in clientelistic top-down relations that exclude non-party supporters. This model can generate high levels of participation, but only among supporters of the ruling party.¹⁸

The second is the utopian "dual power" model. The intention is to replace traditional institutions of representative democracy, such as mayors and governors, with a bottom-up system of direct democracy. This would consist of a territory-based system of local-level participatory institutions in which, at least in theory, any individual could participate in key decisions that affect the community. The ultimate goal is that all political decisions be taken directly by organized communities. When a policy associated with this model prevails, tensions can arise within the party between those primarily concerned with ensuring the party's political hegemony and those hoping to build alternative institutions.¹⁹ Most of the time, the vanguardist and dual power models serve complementary functions by reinforcing the party's political ideology among its core supporters. Consequently, when the dual power model predominates, there can be meaningful instances of grassroots empowerment among those most committed to building alternative institutions, while others in society will tend to be excluded.

The third model is what we call "deepening democracy." Here, participatory institutions complement existing representative institutions in order to increase citizen participation in public decision making and to strengthen citizens' sense of political efficacy. In the deepening democracy model, parties prioritize efforts to maximize the participation of all community members, regardless of their political affiliation, and work to keep partisan politics outside participatory spaces. When this model prevails, participatory institutions are most likely to approximate the ideal of full and equal participation of individuals across the political spectrum and from all socioeconomic strata. At the same time, since parties are less likely to reap direct electoral or other political benefits from participatory

institutions that focus primarily on deepening democracy, they will be less motivated to devote resources to these institutions. Thus, there will be limited levels of community participation compared to participatory institutions where the vanguardist or dual power models predominate.²⁰

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In practice, actors draw on these models to varying extents. Thus, empirical analysis must also consider the effects of various combinations of the models. When the deepening democracy model predominates and either the dual power or vanguardist models are present, the outcome is likely to be temporary high levels of participation (since the presence of the vanguardist model gives hard-nosed pragmatists in the party an incentive to devote

resources to the participatory institutions) combined with politically inclusive participation that minimizes exclusionary practices (since significant forces in the party are committed to a vision of participatory democracy that requires full political inclusion). The problem with this combination is that it is unstable and prone to drift toward the predominance of the vanguardist model and the marginalization of the deepening democracy model.

However, the deepening democracy model can coexist with the vanguardist or dual power model with neither predominating. This too produces a temporary period of high participation and broad political inclusion—though less than when the deepening democracy model predominates. Still, this is an unstable combination that tends toward the predominance of the vanguardist model. When the vanguardist or dual power model predominates and the deepening democracy model is secondary, there may be some examples of broad political inclusion, but for the most part we will observe high participation combined with high political exclusion. Over time, this combination tends to further marginalize the deepening democracy model, leaving only the vanguardist or dual power models. Finally, while the dual power model may persist beyond the lifespan of the deepening democracy model, it tends to be subordinated to the vanguardist model over time.

Electoral Competition Conditions

The tendency of each of the scenarios discussed above to drift toward vanguardist or dual power, and ultimately to vanguardist dominance, begs the question of why these scenarios are unstable and are unlikely to produce an outcome in which the deepening democracy model predominates over the long term. That is, what factors can tip the scales toward one model or another? We argue this can be explained primarily by whether the main sponsoring party faces electoral competition and, most crucially, what level of popular support it enjoys.

When parties enjoy high levels of popularity, it is less costly for them to be flexible with respect to their relationship to participatory institutions. They may even view broad political inclusion in the institution as a strategically valuable means of reaching out to new constituencies. Under these conditions, the relative mix of the three models will depend on the party's specific ideological characteristics and the amount of resources at its disposal to distribute through participatory institutions. Generally, though, this is a context in which participatory institutions are most politically inclusive, while also attracting significant levels of participation.

Critical Juncture: Formalization of Chavismo's Authoritarian Rule

Suppose, however, that the party's electoral fortunes decline. For example, if, as in the case of *Chavismo's* PSUV from 2007, the party's winning electoral coalition becomes less stable and its resources dedicated to electioneering become scarcer, the party will face a choice: either abandon its focus on participatory institutions in favor of more strategic electoral activities, or embrace the vanguardist approach and narrowly view participatory institutions in instrumental electoral terms. The latter option will increasingly exclude individuals not supportive of the ruling party, as the party increasingly concentrates its resources on likely supporters. It is unlikely that the participatory institution's credibility among the whole population could ever be regained after the party decides to use it primarily for electoral purposes.

In the event of authoritarian backsliding, the vanguardist model is even more likely to dominate. The ruling party no longer needs to worry about building a majoritarian coalition to win elections. Its primary concern becomes the reliability of its core supporters—maintaining a militant base willing to turn out to defend the regime on the streets and at the polls during non-competitive elections. In this context, the party has few

incentives to ensure political inclusivity in participatory spaces. The dual power model may persist, primarily due to its role not only in maintaining the support of ideologically committed party militants, but even more importantly because it provides political justification for undermining the authority of elected officials opposed to the party.

For instance, if the party seeks to minimize the authority of opposition mayors (as well as less compliant mayors from its own ranks), the dual power model allows it to claim that doing so is part of a broader plan to democratize society, even if it is truly part of an effort to further centralize power in the hands of the ruling party. Despite the valuable legitimization role that the dual power model may continue to play under conditions of authoritarian backsliding, it still tends to be eclipsed by the vanguardist model, which is capable of delivering more immediate and substantive political benefits.

Venezuela from 2015 to the present is a case in point for a ruling party's tendency to transform multidimensional participatory processes into a one-dimensional process after the transformation of electoral competition conditions. After losing handily in the December 2015 legislative elections, *Chavismo* began to entrench its authoritarian tendencies at the institutional level. This formalization of the regime's authoritarianism included power grabs designed to help the party to tighten its grip on power. Legislative elections had given the opposition the means to restructure state institutions that govern elections and key parts of the judiciary—scenarios Maduro was not willing to accommodate. With self-preservation in mind, in 2017 Maduro neutralized the legislature by creating a supra-constitutional Constituent Assembly, which amounted to a trump card he could play to block any opposition move.

In this context, where building a majoritarian electoral coalition has become more or less irrelevant, the value of the CCs to the PSUV has increasingly centered on maintaining the support of a relatively small but deeply committed core capable of providing the regime a base level of legitimacy by turning out at mass rallies and voting in low-turnout elections (such as the 2017 National Constituent Assembly elections and the 2018 Presidential election). Thus, there is little to no incentive for the party to maintain politically inclusive participatory spaces. The dual power model has persisted in rhetoric, but is increasingly a political tool used in the service of the vanguardist model to maintain the support of party militants committed to the dual power model, and to provide an ideological justification for future efforts to centralize political power.

Communal Councils: Participatory Institutions' Changing Political Character

Tables 1 and 2 summarize our theoretical framework, and Table 2 includes a description of the relative strength of each model of party-participatory relations throughout the evolution of Venezuelan CCs. In the Councils' first years, when the PSUV enjoyed high levels of popular support and had copious resources at its disposal, all three models played an important role in the party's relationship with the CCs. However, after the economic crisis of 2008 and the opposition's strong performance in the 2010 legislative elections, the deepening democracy model was subordinated to the other two models, as exhibited in the more conservative, state-centric law regulating the CCs passed in 2009.²¹ Finally, the Maduro government effectively ended competitive elections in Venezuela in wake of the opposition's 2015 victory in National Assembly elections. Under these conditions, the deepening democracy model has all but disappeared, and the dual power model has taken on an increasingly instrumental role in service of the vanguardist model. The CCs have become almost direct organs of the party.

The Maduro government effectively ended competitive elections in Venezuela in wake of the opposition's 2015 victory in National Assembly elections.

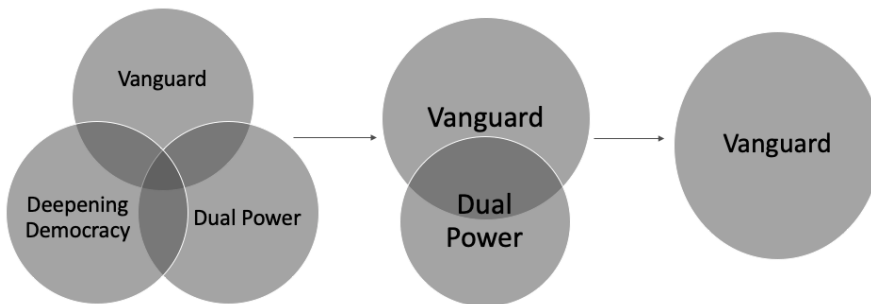
Table 1: Party-Participatory Relations Under Varying Political Conditions

	High Legitimacy	Low Legitimacy
Democratic Competition	Flexibility to allow a range of competing visions of participatory institutions coexist	Vanguardist model predominate
Little/No Democratic Competition	N/A	Vanguardist model predominates

Table 2: Effects of Models of Party-Participation Institution Relations on Grassroots Participation

Models	Outcome	Period Dominant in Venezuela's CCs
Only Dual power and/or Vanguardism	Generates tension within ruling party while also strengthening ruling party's base and increasing exclusion of other sectors of society	After 2015
Only Deepening Democracy	Isolated experiences of improved grassroots representation	Never
Deepening Democracy dominant and Dual power/Vanguardism secondary	Coexistence until political necessity forces the party to abandon participatory institution	Never
Dual power and/or Vanguardism dominant and Deepening Democracy secondary	Coexistence until economic/political necessity forces the virtual disappearance of the latter by the former	2009-2015
Deepening Democracy and Dual power/Vanguardism roughly equal in importance	Coexistence until economic/political necessity forces the party to abandon participatory institution or shift to Dual Power/Vanguardism dominance	2006-2009 (with new CC law)

Figure 6: Participatory Institutions and Power Politics



CONCLUSION

Venezuela's Communal Councils show that participatory institutions can endure well beyond the expiration date scholars might assign them based on fluctuating political and economic conditions. Despite the economic contraction that dried up their oil-soaked budgets and the political polarization that threatens to make them ungovernable, CCs are still at work in thousands of communities across the country. Unfortunately, their endurance is fueled largely by their instrumental role in holding together the PSUV's core support base, particularly among the urban poor. In their initial years, despite many problems, the Councils provided an opportunity structure for previously marginalized grassroots activists. This balance between top-down and bottom-up was highly fragile. As the party's electoral strength and economic resources declined, however, the Councils increasingly became appendages of the PSUV and crowded out spaces for deepening democracy.

What do the CCs tell us generally about the fate of the Left and participatory democracy in Latin America? Sadly, they reinforce fears that local participatory democracy—long one of the Left's signature policies in the region—is at best a valuable grassroots program that can only prosper temporarily and under very specific circumstances. At worst, the experience serves as an instrument of social control by unscrupulous populist governments.

More broadly, for the research agenda, our analysis makes three crucial contributions. First, we have re-centered a critical debate over links between participatory democracy and power politics. Second, within that

debate, we have generated two important new hypotheses we hope to consider in greater depth in future work. When political and economic conditions become less favorable for sustaining participatory institutions, most parties will abandon them. Those that do not abandon them are likely to instrumentalize such institutions as part and parcel of an authoritarian power consolidation strategy. Third, in issuing a call for scholarship for a comprehensive look at the interactions between activists, state institutions, and parties at the grassroots level, we have suggested that the changing

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political character of participatory institutions is a matter not of “if,” but of “when.” That observation need not be a cause of cynicism. We do not argue that the changing political character will invariably result in complete co-optation, though it is difficult to think of any large-scale experiments with participatory democracy under left-of-center governments in Latin America that have both endured over the long term *and* avoided being co-opted by parties for electoral purposes.

Rather, we have argued that political party leaders have a choice when it comes to the models they select for governing the grassroots. Of course, the fact that leaders have a choice is not itself a cause for optimism. Pointing out the voluntary part of the story is simply a way of saying that imaginative leadership and creative organizational schemes are indispensable when it comes to the challenge of bringing participatory democracy to life. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Davies-Contrapunto, Vanessa. “Encuesta Revela Que Hay Más Chavistas Descontentos que Chavistas Maduristas,” *Aporrea.org*, July 7, 2017, <<https://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n311420.html>> (accessed May 9, 2019); and Ibis León, “Seijas: 60% de los Encuestadores Prefiere ‘un Líder que no Proviene del Chavismo,’” *Efecto Cocuyo*, November 28, 2018, <<http://efectococuyo.com/politica/seijas-60-de-los-encuestados-prefieren-un-lider-que-no-proviene-del-chavismo/>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 2 David Biller, “World Bank Cuts its Latin America Growth Cal,” *Bloomberg*, April 4, 2019, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-04/world-bank-cuts-latin-america-growth-outlook-on-fresh-headwinds>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 3 Tamoá Calzadilla and José Fernando López, “Venezuelans Break Record for U.S. Asylum Petitions, But Few Are Approved,” *Univision News*, October 31, 2018, <<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/venezuelans-break-record-for-us-asylum-petitions-but-few-are-approved>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 4 Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida, “Avances de Resultados 2018,” *Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Universidad Central de Venezuela and Universidad Simón Bolívar*, 2018, <<http://elucabista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/RESULTADOS-PRELIMINARES-ENCOVI-2018-30-nov.pdf>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
- 5 Author’s conversation with Luis Vidal, President of More Consulting and Polling, April 15, 2019.
- 6 Our survey was conducted between November and December of 2018. We sampled 1800 individuals, divided into clusters of six individuals (two CC leaders, *two* ordinary CC participants, and two people who have never participated in a CC). We randomly sampled clusters of six individuals in each of 300 neighborhoods across Venezuela, using a stratified sampling design in which municipalities were randomly chosen proportional to population size. Since we sampled both CC participants as well as non-participants, our survey allows us to generate nationally-representative statistics, both for CC participants as well as the population as a whole.
- 7 Samuel Handlin, “Mass organization and the durability of competitive authoritarian regimes: Evidence from Venezuela,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 2016 49 (9), 1238-1269; Jana Morgan, “Deterioration and Polarization of Party Politics in Venezuela” in

- Scott Mainwaring (ed.), *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 291-325.
- 8 The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Available at <www.LapopSurveys.org>.
 - 9 Cira Pascual Marquina, "What's Been Learned Won't Be Easily Forgotten: A Conversation with Antonio Gonzalez Plessmann," *Venezuelanalysis.com*. January 17, 2019, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14235>> (accessed May 9, 2019); and Ricardo Vaz, "Production and Conflict in El Maizal Commune," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, September 7, 2018, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14038>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
 - 10 Ricardo Vaz, "Interview with Angel Prado (Part I): 'The Commune Holds the Solution to the Crisis,'" *Venezuelanalysis.com*, August 16, 2018, <<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14005>> (accessed May 9, 2019).
 - 11 Interview with former Presidential of Venezuela's Presidential Commission of Popular Power, December 5, 2018.
 - 12 Estimates of turnout in the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, for example, ranged from around 30 percent to 46 percent. If we take the average, 38 percent, and assume that Maduro's core base constituted 20 percent of the electorate and that turnout among the core base was high (our survey suggests this figure was over 90 percent), this would suggest that Maduro's core supporters constituted at least 70 percent of his vote share in the 2018 elections. In other words, he very nearly could have won the election without *any* voters from outside his core supporters. Turnout estimates for the 2017 Constituent Assembly elections were even lower, making the impact of Maduro's core supporters even greater in those elections.
 - 13 Interview with former Presidential of Venezuela's Presidential Commission of Popular Power, December 5, 2018.
 - 14 Michael Penfold, "Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Missions," *Latin American Politics and Society*, Winter 2007, 49(4). Also see Kirk Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 195-230.
 - 15 For a discussion of this point during a time of economic surplus, see Michael M. McCarthy "Possibilities and Limits of Politicized Participation: Communal Councils, Coproduction, and *Poder Popular* in Chávez's Venezuela," in Sharpe et al., *New Institutions for Participatory Democracy in Latin America: Voice and Consequence* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 123-148.
 - 16 "Cultura Comunal del Venezolano." *Datoslatam*. November, 2011; and Author's original survey, 2018.
 - 17 2009 data from Jesús Machado, "Participación social y consejos comunales en Venezuela," *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, 2009 (15); 2018 data from author's original survey of 1078 CC participants in late 2018.
 - 18 For examples of academic literature that conceptualizes the relationship between the PSUV and the CCs in this way, see Handlin, Samuel, "How to Keep the Playing Field Tilted: Mass Organization and the Durability of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Social Science Research Network Working Paper*, 2015; Michael McCarthy, "Populism in Power: Venezuela's Chavismo from Mobilization to Party-Building (1999-2010)," PhD Dissertation, Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, 2016.
 - 19 This conceptualization of the relationship between the PSUV and the CCs has been made most directly in George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), Chapter 10.
 - 20 This is the most common understanding of the relationship between political

parties and participatory institutions in the academic literature. Key examples include B. Wampler, *Participatory Budgeting in Brazil: Contestation, Cooperation and Accountability* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007); G. Baiocchi, *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Leonardo Avritzer, *Participatory Institutions in Democratic Brazil* (Washington and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

- 21 Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Ley de los consejos comunales (Caracas, 2009). This law, replacing a 2006 law of the same name, increased the role of the central government in regulating the CCs, and more explicitly tied the CCs to the government's political project of "21st Century Socialism."