



THE BASIS OF SUPPORT FOR HUGO CHÁVEZ: MEASURING THE DETERMINANTS OF PRESIDENTIAL JOB APPROVAL IN VENEZUELA

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Introduction

Since 1999, Venezuela has experienced a dramatic transformation of its political system with the coming to power of Hugo Chávez. Chávez dismantled the previous political system and established neo-populist structures that rely on his personal appeal and the close collaboration of the armed forces. Chávez has relied heavily on significant support from the poor and those who felt economically and politically excluded by the “*Punto Fijo*” system.¹

President Chávez has built an impressive record of electoral victories; winning every electoral contest except one since coming to power in 1999. He continues to receive relatively high levels of support among sectors of Venezuelan society. However, there is evidence of growing discontent with high crime rates, high levels of inflation, and significant corruption in the public administration. Using data from the *AmericasBarometer* surveys conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2010, this paper seeks to examine the basis of Chávez’s popular support.

Populism as the Underlying Principle of the Regime

Brian Loveman and Thomas Davies argue that “In the 1960s and 1970s professional military officers in Latin America scanned the panorama of the hemisphere’s history and blamed the ineptitude and corruption of civilian politicians as well as the imported institutions of liberal democracy for the wretched conditions in their region” (Loveman and Davies 1997: 3). This appears to be the same motivation in Venezuela. An alienated population fell under the charm of the charismatic paratrooper who was willing to sacrifice his life for the country in a heroic effort to take over the government and “save” the nation from a corrupt political system.

Populism as a political regime has a long history in Latin America. From Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil in the 1940s to Evo Morales in Bolivia and Chávez today, leaders from the ideological right and left have employed populist means to gain support and govern their nations. Studies have focused on the mechanisms by which populist leaders acquire and retain popular support. Significant scholarly

