



# Venezuela: Times of Depolarization

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## Background: 1998 Electoral Campaign

The 1998 electoral campaign was marked by a climate of political tension unbeknownst to the country in its contemporary history. The precedents of this situation should be found in the political crisis unleashed after the 1992 coups d'état. The first of these was headed by Hugo Chávez, a lieutenant colonel who created a military cabal in the 1980s inspired by the ideas of social vindication and egalitarianism from the Latin American left.

Venezuela had a representative democratic system, established by consensus among the different political and social forces since the overthrow of the last military dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958. Democratic rule was largely tied to the redistribution of oil revenue, the country's main resource.

Venezuelan democracy survived coup d'état attempts. However, once Chávez's political rights were reinstated after a brief prison term, he

ran as a presidential candidate in the 1998 elections. The traditional parties, namely social democratic Acción Democrática (AD) and social Christian Independent Political Electoral Organization Committee (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, COPEI), were facing internal crises partly due to the tensions generated by the political decentralization process initiated by former President of the Republic Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989 - 1993) and the emergence of new leaders in different gubernatorial and mayoral offices.

Towards the end of the electoral campaign and in view of the broad support aroused by Chávez across society, the traditional parties gathered around the electoral bid of former Carabobo State Governor Henrique Salas Römer, in a central state of the country. Once the candidates running for president became official, the campaign polarized around the democracy-dictatorship dichotomy. The forces gathered around Chávez named themselves the Great Patriotic Pole, while the sectors supporting Salas Römer were known as the Democratic Pole. According to Lander and López Maya (1999), businesspersons and a significant section of the mainstream media, a wing of the Armed Forces, and many public opinion leaders began an erratic opposition to the emerging campaign of Chávez Frías.

For the authors mentioned above, Chávez was stigmatized as “authoritarian and an instigator of violence”. Meanwhile, on the campaign trail, stomp speeches by this candidate held on to a violent and threatening narrative against the traditional political parties and those who opposed his plan to summon a constituent national assembly, his main campaign offer. The parties around the Democratic Pole also reacted inappropriately and disproportionately to Chávez’s remarks, and encouraged the stigmatization of his followers as citizens lacking formal education and belonging to the underprivileged classes.

Lander and López Maya (1999) estimated that the starting point of polarization in the country was the 1998 electoral run won by Hugo Chávez by a landslide (according to official figures, he obtained 56% of the votes, that is, 3,573,685, against 39.97% for Salas Römer, with 2,613,161 votes). From then on, Chávez embodied change and hope for a great part of the impoverished masses effectively disenfranchised from the country’s political and social system. The opposition, fragmented after the triumph of the Patriotic Pole, experienced a

representation crisis which subsequently enabled the success of the *Chavista* agenda for the election of representatives for the National Constituent Assembly of 2000 (going by the moniker *La Constituyente*) and the drafting of a new highest law of the land. One can safely say that the 1998 elections meant the total transformation of the Venezuelan political system and the beginning of Hugo Chávez's hegemony.

### **Political Polarization: Democracy v. Dictatorship 1999 - 2006**

As stated above, the process of political change initiated by Chávez was oriented in the first place to the change of the 1961 Constitution by means of *La Constituyente*. There is no doubt that the 1999 Constitution is republican and democratic, although its majority electoral system ("winner takes all" in a voting district) implemented for its assemblypersons, prevented an accurate representation of the country's plurality.

However, at a second stage initiated in 2001 with the passing of a package of laws sponsored by the president by means of a mechanism named 'Enabling Law' whereby he had temporary authority to legislate by decree, as well as the coup attempt in 2002, reactivated the polarization in the country. The differences between government supporters and opponents began to become irreconcilable, amid a poor-rich dichotomy fueled by Chávez.

Despite mediation efforts by the Organization of American States (OAS), through the so-called Table of Negotiation and Agreements of 2003, which reached a compromise to hold a recall referendum, this political crisis was not resolved, as the government failed to comply with its commitments. One of the key points of the agreement, a recall referendum on the president, was protracted well into 2004, under unequal conditions for the opposition.

The private media played a decisive role in this climate of polarization and tension. Political analyst Andrés Cañizález (2009) explains that the media were part of the national political conflict, to such an extent that, during the OAS mediation, representatives of the main private and

state-owned media companies were called, highlighting the political positioning of the private media. For the author, this situation also had its counterpart in the bias of the state-owned media.

For Venezuelan sociologist and human rights activist Rafael Uzcátegui:

Since 2004, Venezuela's political outlook has been dominated by the permanent conversion of citizen mobilization agendas into a mere electoral concern. Except for 2011, electoral events were held in all annual periods; the list includes, up to 2012, two presidential elections, three referendums, two parliamentary elections, four gubernatorial and two municipal elections. The holding of the elections has promoted, with different intensities over time, a process of political polarization by which voters have chosen from two proposals for a country publicized as antagonistic and mutually exclusive without actually being so. (Uzcátegui, 2013)

According to Saúl Cabrera (2023), director of opinion research firm Consultores 21, Chávez almost always maintained high approval ratings. When he was elected in 1998, he obtained a 50% approval; in 2000, he reached a record 65%. In the months prior to the 2004 presidential recall referendum, his approval was at its lowest point at 35%. However, the social programs created shortly before such vote boosted his popularity and he was able to win this contest comfortably with 59% of the votes.

Since Chávez was elected president in 1998, the country's politics revolved around him; he defined the country's public agenda and encouraged polarization from his position of power. For Juan Manuel Trak (2017) "*Chavismo / anti-Chavismo* or ruling party / opposition were erected as labels under which Venezuelans placed themselves and others."

## Ideological Political Polarization 2006 - 2017

During this period, it was possible to witness an intensified polarization in the country and a solidification of Chávez's popularity, who took a further step to control government institutions. When he was reelected in 2006, he proposed a constitutional amendment in open contradiction with the highest law of the land approved by referendum in 1999. This reform implied the imposition of a socialist state.

For Venezuelan researcher Margarita López Maya:

With the 2007 constitutional reform project, drafted by Chávez and the National Assembly [*federal Legislative*], then controlled by the government coalition, the turn towards the creation of a popular power different from the popular sovereignty of the Constitution became clear. Article 16 of that reform proposed the creation of the popular power as a new structure among the branches of government, formed by ‘communities’, which he called ‘geographical hubs of the Socialist State’, and which “does not arise from suffrage or any election, but from the condition of human groups organized as the basis of the population” (Article 136). The popular power became the basis for a public power that claimed to be qualitatively different from the other branches of government. (López, 2018)

The reform was rejected by voters in a referendum; but the foundations of what was called ‘popular power’ were imposed since 2009 through pieces of legislation openly defying the current constitution.

This time, Chávez’s approval ratings were not enough to press the amendment forward. The exacerbation of the polarizing discourse and the increase of control over the population through social aid handouts kept dividing Venezuelans. The turning point of this period was 2012. That year, a new presidential election was called for which Chávez ran again, thanks to a controversial constitutional amendment that removed term limits. This change revealed much more clearly the hegemonic nature of *Chavismo*.

Nevertheless, the country was already beginning to experience some changes. The economic model based on the extraction of oil and minerals by state monopolies and the redistribution of wealth showed signs of weakness. Until then, Chávez was the all-powerful leader and there was no one else but him within the ruling coalition; but his sudden illness and physical decline as of 2011 opened the door to reorganizing the opposition forces.

It can be said that the 2012 presidential election was significant evidence that polarization was beginning to give way in the country. The young governor of Miranda state, Henrique Capriles, of the Primero Justicia party (center left), became the opposition standard bearer after a successful open primary process with a significant turnout.

In López Maya's view:

His (Capriles's) first supposed advantage was to be a young and healthy candidate against a candidate in the terminal phase of a serious illness, so his main asset was to have canvassed 300 towns in the four months of the campaign to make 'face-to-face' contact with his potential voters... under the slogan 'there is a way'. López Maya (2018)

Candidate Capriles avoided polarizing with Chávez and lost by a margin much narrower than expected (approximately 9%, obtaining more than 6 million votes). Capriles's run and his conciliatory discourse began to break somewhat with Chávez's excluding 'us against them' rhetoric.

Likewise, it was still evident that voters continued to support Chávez. Despite doubts about his fitness to begin a new term in January 2013 due to his serious health condition, he got over eight million votes.

In fact, after Chávez's death in April 2013, Nicolás Maduro, the leader chosen by him to succeed him, won the presidential election called with a mere 1.5% lead over Henrique Capriles, the candidate of the opposition coalition, then named Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD).

Another milestone during this period was the election of the 2015 National Assembly. This contest had important repercussions for the life of the country. In that election and amid all the unfair advantage tactics deployed by the elite in power, the opposition coalition MUD obtained an overwhelming majority of 112 representatives against 51 for *Chavismo*.

In an article for *El País*, Spanish journalist Javier Lafuente states:

This victory constitutes an epic blow to the figure and rule of President Nicolás Maduro, since the elections had become a plebiscite of sorts. The economic crisis, the crime rate, or the persecution of opposition leaders have been enough reasons for society to have said 'enough' and opted for a change in the political landscape of the country. (Lafuente, 2015, December 7)

The results showed that *Chavismo* was no longer majority. They also constitute another proof that Chávez's polarizing discourse no longer resonated with a society overwhelmed by a survival living standard and

the economic crisis affecting government and opposition supporters alike.

It is worth underscoring that, barely three years after Chávez's passing, society began to move towards depolarization. A survey conducted by the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (UCAB) in 2015 on citizen perception of the electoral system clearly shows that citizens voiced their rejection of politicians, both pro-government and opposition.

Respondents identified themselves outside the government-opposition poles in a 55.1%, and 25% stated that all politicians were the same. In a context of tension and polarizing discourse, this time by newly inaugurated President Nicolás Maduro, voters began to move away from the poles. In the same survey, a negative perception of the country's direction is also reflected in 86.9%.

Moreover, during these early years of Maduro's term in office, the stability of the regime was compromised, following two cycles of protests in 2014 and 2017 that caused hundreds of casualties and injuries (La Fiscalía venezolana... 2017).

Describing the political moment following the protests, psychologist, professor, and researcher Manuel Llorens explained:

Trust in representatives, institutions, and the community itself has been lost. A revealing sign of the widespread distrust is the infighting and dismemberment of the opposition. Sections of the population accuse opposition politicians of betraying the demonstrators who died in the streets. As casualties increase among the social movements, part of those involved experience the possibility of any negotiated solution as a betrayal. While the government's popularity has continued to drop, support for the MUD has not increased. As of December 2017, in a national survey, 61% of the population assessed the administration of the national government as bad. That same survey found that 57% of the population assessed the performance of [opposition-controlled] National Assembly negatively, and 74% expressed the same regarding the National Constituent Assembly [of 2017] [...] *Chavismo* was able to survive and hold on to power with minor fractures. (Llorens, 2017)

A study conducted on the crisis and democracy in Venezuela by the Center for Political Studies of the UCAB (Centro de Estudios Políticos de la UCAB, CEPUCAB), compiled by researcher Juan Manuel Trak (2017) shortly before the 2017 cycle of protests, found that barely

12.29% of voters identified themselves with the MUD and 12.89% with *Chavismo*. This clearly evidenced the disaffection of Venezuelans for both poles.

For the opposition, this meant a terrible defeat which led to the dissolution of the fragile unity of its various movements and parties with the consequent demobilization of society. Once more, *Chavismo* polarized the country through elections, such were the cases of those for the National Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC) in July 2017 – inaugurated in August – and the immediate call for gubernatorial and mayoral elections in October that year.

It is important to note that, in those years, the opposition also participated in the polarizing dynamics. The gap between moderate and radical sectors became increasingly evident, the former in favor of a resolution of the conflict through electoral means, as opposed to the latter in favor of the use of violence to overthrow the government. Therefore, it can be affirmed that polarization also occurred within the opposition.

Resuming the insurrectional strategy in 2017 prevented the opposition from advancing in the search for a governance compromise that could make a way for a political transition. Unfortunately, the favorable juncture after the parliamentary election in 2015 and the beginning of the process of citizen indifference towards the political poles were aborted.

Those years, there were also efforts by the international community to settle the Venezuelan conflict, among them those made by the Union of South American Nations (USAN [UNASUR in Spanish]) and the Vatican; but these mediation efforts failed because the government was not willing to comply with any agreements, while it was becoming more radical internally.

It is worth noting that, during this period, President Maduro could not increase his approval ratings, being rejected by a large part of the country since the beginning of his term in office. According to polling firm Datanálisis (Reuters, 2017, June 27), his disapproval rating was 76.4%; in 2018, after the cycle of protests that shook the country the



previous year, his approval barely reached 20% of voters.

This negative appraisal of his performance increased in 2018 according to the same opinion research firm. Venezuelans, namely 84% of them, rejected his administration and expected him to step down that same year.

The context in which these changes occurred was framed in a worsening economic crisis. The shortage of staple products was caused by price and exchange control policies, inflation, and increased political repression.

## The Long Road to Depolarization

One of the political phenomena that has caused the most negative impact on public life and democracies has been precisely polarization (Naím, 2022). From great divisions in societies to attempts to crush internal dissidence, these are harmful consequences of a process of an exercise of politics that does not admit halfway stances or thorough analysis, but rather partisan militancy anchored to argumentative or ideological rigidity rather than reality. Many countries in the region have experienced and continue to experience effects associated to polarization that have undermined their internal institutional frameworks and mechanisms of adequately managing conflict. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuela has been the clearest example of this.

Starting in 2019, after more than twenty years of polarization and internal division, Venezuelan society began to define itself as absolutely de-ideologized and disaffected from the political poles that had been typical of it for so long. Instead, since that year, pragmatism has gained ground, stemming from the harsh economic reality experienced by the population, which has greatly affected their daily lives. Especially among underprivileged communities, which were the primary targets of the argumentation and ideological frameworks of polarization, there is a clear aversion to continue with divisive narratives or point at any so-called ‘common enemies’. This conjuncture shows how people, weary of polarizing tales, take refuge in political independence far

from parties and leaders who cling to a rationale similar to that of the last two decades, which evidently no longer represents the collective feeling of the population and the structure of the popular imagination.

This new feature of Venezuelan society is more clearly linked to a depolarization process that has not yet resonated with the country's leadership, hence precisely the current disconnect and the immense challenges to redirect the country towards an electoral path. However, some steps are being taken more from the grassroots than from the leadership. The important and salvageable aspect of this process is to fix and make visible in the public agenda all the damage that polarization can cause in a country with democratic institutions that, albeit imperfect, allowed settling differences amid a plurality of options.

Even public opinion polls of 2018 and 2019, such as those by Datincorp and Delphos (cited by Martínez, 2019, April 13), show how more than a third of voters do not identify with either the opposition or the government.

The hard road to depolarization has been full of ordeals too hard for the population. The collapsed economy and utilities, the destroyed quality of life, the hatred rooted in many groups, and others are evidence of the need to look closely into this phenomenon that is increasingly gaining momentum around the world every day.

Depolarization has set the tone for a gradual depoliticization of society. Several public opinion studies from 2020 onwards, conducted by such firms widely known in the country as Datincorp, Datanálisis, and Delphos (cited by Ramírez, 2023, March 15), show a generalized disappointment of society with parties and politicians. Furthermore, a significant 81.1% of the population desires a change of rule in the country, as found by Delphos.

The disconnect is impressive even factoring in the high levels of rejection that sitting president Nicolás Maduro continues to arouse. The current profile of Venezuelan society is marked by a deep fragmentation of its political leadership, with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) being the first organized minority and below it a large number of political organizations with precarious levels of support compared

to the entirety of the electorate.

According to a survey by Datincorp (El Nacional, 2023, February 8), the preference for the ruling party barely reaches 18.5% of voters. Meanwhile, 54.19% say they do not identify with any political movement.

This detachment of citizens from traditional political parties and poles is also geared towards a search for new leaders. In 2019, according to the firm Consultores 21, 73% of Venezuelans clamored for the need of new a leadership in the country. This lack of leading figures is expressed in the positive ratings held by Chávez ten years after his death: 56%, against 22% by Maduro according to opinion research firm Datanálisis (Santaeulalia *et al*, 2023, March 5).

This phenomenon shows a growing depolarization of the Venezuelan population. Rather, through other types of assessment more associated with their particular and collective needs, it shows a process against the tide of over two decades of disagreements and disputes, often bordering on political violence, as has been escribed throughout this paper.

It is estimated that migration has also had a decisive impact in the transformation of political identification, since according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) more than seven million Venezuelans have left the country. Of these, six million are scattered across Latin America.

In 2019, a political development further complicating the Venezuelan crisis occurred. National Assembly Speaker Juan Guaidó, member of opposition party Voluntad Popular, proclaimed himself interim president of Venezuela following the Legislative's disavowal of the 2018 presidential election. Guaidó invoked Article 233 of the Venezuelan constitution which sets forth that, if by the beginning of the presidential term (January 10) there is no president-elect, the National Assembly Speaker takes the executive office until new elections are held.

The National Assembly Speaker was recognized by most democratic countries, and obtained significant support from the United States; but it soon became evident that this strategy headed the opposition for a new dead end. Meanwhile, Maduro continued to hold effective

power in the country. The objective of this ‘interim government’, as the opposition called it, was to push and trigger a political transition.

In the early months of 2019, popular support for Congressman Guaidó was very high, at 56.5% according to opinion research firm Datanálisis (2019). Subsequently, as the expectation of change lost momentum, the support decreased to the point that, at the beginning of 2021, the same opinion research firm (2021) reflected that barely 11.5% of those inquired would vote for him in a hypothetical presidential election.

Early support for Congressman Guaidó also revealed a desire for change in society. This did not come exclusively from those who identify with the opposition, as happened in the recent past, but from a significant number of Venezuelans who were depolarized by having their basic needs unmet, thereby assessing the government’s performance negatively.

The truth is that, after more than twenty years of polarization and internal division, Venezuelan society today is marked by an absolutely de-ideologized vision and a disconnect from the political poles typical of it for so long. According to Delphos (quoted by Brando, 2021, July 22), 36.9% of voters favor fair elections. Consequently, the choice for a peaceful solution to the crisis continues to be prevalent.

Therefore, as of 2019, Maduro’s rule has evolved towards pragmatism and de-ideologization to remain in power. Meanwhile, the opposition is still searching for the strategies and narratives required to reconnect with citizens.

López Maya explains that:

The project based on the 1999 Constitution was replaced by an autocratic one; but there maintains the rhetoric of the radical left, although with high doses of pragmatism, which led, for example, to the *de facto* dollarization of the economy, and very high levels of corruption. (López Maya, 2023)

In any case, this incomplete liberalization of the economy has allowed the government to gain stability in the face of a demobilized population focused on survival.

A survey conducted by Datincorp (2023) reveals the reaffirmation of trends among Venezuela's public opinion in recent years, 70% express feeling a great disappointment with politics, while a no less important 21% say they are completely indifferent.

On the other hand, negative assessment of the president's performance remains very high, standing at 73%. From this it can be inferred that the desire for political change remains in society, regardless of their partisan or ideological leanings.

Another important piece of data provided by the study is that 67% of citizens favor seeking negotiated solutions with the government, and continue to support change by means of elections (Seguías, as quoted by Olivares, 2023, February 15). Venezuelans are also in search of new political leaders: 47% expect the emergence of an independent to bring the country together. These figures show the leadership crisis existing both in the ruling party and in the opposition, which undoubtedly feeds depoliticization.

This clearly points to a depolarized Venezuelan voter profile, according to which the old divisive 'us against them' rhetoric of early *Chavismo* gives way to pragmatism, but without losing sight of the priority for political change in the country.

## Conclusion

The people of Venezuela have been moving away from ideological poles to meet halfway on the ground of real needs that affect their daily lives. Political violence and dissent that intensified the differences among Venezuelans have been giving way to a path towards reconciliation from the grassroots away from political parties and their leadership.

A framework of reference for de-politization among the population has been building up: More than 70% of the people do not believe in political parties or political leaders. In this scenario, the polarization that marked the country since 1998 can hardly find a place and popular impact if invoked by any particular leader. Today, the way of 'triangulation' (Morris, 2003) has much more weight electorally speaking than a return to polarizing appeals.

The narratives of the political leadership have significantly lost ground in the collective imagination. Undoubtedly, the pandemic and the multidimensional crisis that has been affecting the Venezuelan population for the last ten years undermined any support achieved by resorting to polarization. Now, this gap has encouraged the depoliticization of society which requires a realignment of interests and discourse.

The majority of Venezuelan society leans towards dialogue, reunion, and an electoral solution that guarantees minimum conditions required to encourage a process recognized by all parties involved.

Although depolarization has become a trend for the last few years, it does not mean that, early on in a new electoral contest for president, it cannot be used, especially by those who currently hold power: Nicolás Maduro and the PSUV. If such scenario is reconfigured, it will probably not have the same impact as in previous years because of the current traits of a Venezuelan society, weary of it, as something deemed outright useless for the development of the country in the collective and popular view.

In this process of citizen disbelief and depolarization, depoliticization is rooted, it may become a hindrance to political participation and work for the democratization of the country towards the next electoral contests. On the other hand, depolarization is also currently a factor in favor of any eventual progress by international mediation initiatives, as well as the reconstruction of the social fabric severely damaged during the hardest stage of polarization.

The case of Venezuela proves that the phenomenon of polarization is absolutely induced by political actors whose strategic goal is ‘us against them’ in order to obtain electoral gains. However, depolarization stems from circumstances that encourage the reunion of society based on common-interest issues generally affecting their daily lives. The look is focused on such topics in the face of the weariness and discredit growing among the population. People realize that they have been used by political operatives and distance themselves from politics as long as it is associated with different forms of polarization and confrontation.

As a phenomenon, polarization arouses enthusiasm because of its direct appeal to emotions, values, and feelings. In Venezuela, this combination was more than evident. However, when living conditions gradually deteriorated after Nicolás Maduro's electoral victory in 2013 and the economic consequences of the public policies spearheaded by Hugo Chávez since 1999 worsened following the adoption of wealth redistribution schemes supported only by the country's oil income, society began to disengage from the poles and took a path towards depoliticization. In other words, polarization is a phenomenon that is supported by expectations; but when these are lowered, leaders lose the initial appeal that catapulted them to power.

Venezuela has shown that, contingent on the influence of political parties on public opinion, polarization may or may not gain momentum. In 1998, the discredit of the two main political parties in the country, AD and COPEI, gave rise to the figure of the 'anonymous avenger', capable of holding the corrupt in check and driving the necessary changes in all areas. If the desire for change does not produce a revitalization of political systems, people will easily relate to whomever fuels polarization as an electoral strategy framed in a 'good against evil' dichotomy.

Polarization enables the dismantling of institutions, leaving in the hands of the 'leader' the 'quasi-divine' powers to make any kind of reforms without stopping to think about the consequences. Hyperleadership is directly associated with polarization. In Venezuela, both Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro centralized decision making and the exercise of power directly in their hands under fallacious ideological premises.

Not only does polarization affect a country, but also it can have a deep impact on an entire region. With Venezuela, this has become evident. However, depolarization helps a country with diverging interests to encourage multilateral processes of convergence giving rise to reconciliation mechanisms beyond ideological differences, and setting parameters of democratic coexistence recognized by governments of opposing leanings.

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