

Lessons from Venezuela's Pernicious Polarization

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Visiting Caracas the week of November 14, 2016, I heard much talk of the need for regime transition and what it would take to accomplish it. Public authorities had just crossed a line in the sand of democratic principles when they suspended indefinitely the presidential recall referendum and postponed till 2017 the gubernatorial elections scheduled for December. This curtailment of the right to vote was followed closely by President Nicolas Maduro's emergency visit to the Vatican to renew a call for Vatican mediation of a dialogue with the political opposition, which began October 30.

It was widely presumed that the president wished to delay a vote on terminating his mandate early because of the high likelihood he would lose such a vote. What is not widely discussed is why the government has such fear of losing power, which should be a normal event in a functioning democracy. Nor why the imploding economy and unconstitutional moves did not produce a stronger reaction inside or outside of Venezuela. The logic of polarization helps to explain these puzzles.

Polarization Is a Global Phenomenon

In many ways, the Venezuelan experience of the last two decades presages the polarization apparently sweeping electorates in Europe and the United States today, and provides important warning signs. Hugo Chávez and his polarizing populist style have been credited with initiating a wave of leftist populism in Latin America and have been compared with the right-wing, nationalist populism emerging in Europe in the twenty-first century (Taggart and Rovira Kaltvasser 2015). More recently, the political styles and strategies of Chávez have been compared with Donald Trump's rise to

president in the United States (McCoy 2016a).

Underlying the growing divisions within societies is a cleavage of globalists vs. nationalists responding to larger structural changes across the world. Globalization, automation, information technologies, and the diffusion of global power have all combined to produce reactions of fear and resentment by electorates who have felt left out, left behind, and voiceless.

Venezuelan political elites failed to manage the globalization of the country's commodity-dependent economy, and it suffered a financial and economic crisis in the 1990s as traumatic as the 2008 Great Recession was for the United States and Europe. Oil prices slid and poverty rates nearly tripled from 25 percent to 65 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. Segments of the population that felt "invisible" and unrepresented reacted by rejecting wholesale the traditional parties and electing in 1998 the outsider candidate with the most radical call for change, Hugo Chávez. Like Donald Trump 18 years later in the United States, Chávez rode a wave of disgust with the "corrupt" and inept elites to coast to victory on a platform of vague promises of national renewal, a cleaner and purer democracy, and the recapture and redistribution of the nation's resource wealth from foreign influence and local elites.

Nearly two decades later, Venezuela is on the edge of ruin, its populace still divided but the two polarized camps now more fragmented. International actors have been trying again, for the third time in two decades, to bridge the divide and help the country agree on a set of ground rules and a minimum agenda to prevent it from sinking further into the abyss of misery or erupting in violence.

What lessons can we draw from Venezuela's experience with polarization, and what can be done to overcome it?

Defining Pernicious Polarization

Differences of identities, interests, and attitudes are an inherent part of democracy to be managed, not eliminated. Pernicious polarization occurs when a normal multiplicity of interests and identities in a society begins to align along a single dimension, splitting into two opposing camps (McCoy and Rahman 2016). It is not so much the hardening of opinion on a single issue but rather the reorganization of opinions on different issues along specific identity markers that makes polarization such a difficult problem to solve (Baldassari and Bearman, 2007).

At the extreme, each camp comes to perceive the other in such negative terms that a normal political adversary with whom to engage in a competition for power is transformed into an enemy posing an existential threat to be vanquished (Mallén and García-Guadilla, forthcoming). Categorization extends to all aspects of life, not just political, and peaceful coexistence is no longer perceived by citizens as possible (Lozada 2014; McCoy and Diez 2011).

Pernicious polarization may arise from a variety of factors and with different underlying cleavages, but its manifestation and consequences have striking similarities. Highly polarized societies pose threats to governability, peaceful coexistence, and prosperity. Pernicious polarization creates problems of governance as communication breaks down and the two camps prove unwilling and unable to negotiate and compromise. Political gridlock paralyzes government and in some cases results in instability if neither side can prevail

in the long run. Alternatively, one camp may become hegemonic and tend toward authoritarianism. At the societal level, citizens become divided spatially and socially. They come to believe they can no longer coexist in the same nation.

Polarization is often elite-driven, particularly in electoral democracies. Polarizing rhetoric can be an effective electoral strategy when political leaders intentionally strive to divide the electorate, building on existing cleavages or even creating new ones. Chávez used a populist discourse with Manichean moral dimensions, promising to represent the interests of the “good people” against the conniving “evil elites.” Over time, he included a nationalist dimension as he promised to restore the glory of the nation against the foreign threats represented by the “empire” of the United States.

Today, in North America and Europe, a globalist/nationalist divide is evident in the discourse of leaders promising to protect the interests of citizens “left out” or “left behind” by globalist threats such as job-sucking trade deals, job-threatening or terrorist-threatening immigrants and refugees, or threats to traditional culture and religion in countries ranging from the United States to the United Kingdom, France, Hungary, and Turkey.

Once a polarizing electoral logic is in place and the population is divided psychologically, spatially, and materially, how can the perceptions of the other camp be changed from one of an enemy to be vanquished to that of an adversary to compete against and at times negotiate with to achieve the collective interest? This is the dilemma facing Venezuela today, and lessons from its experience may inform the current situation in Venezuela as well

as other countries embarking on a similar path of pernicious polarization.

Mitigating Pernicious Polarization

In Venezuela, the divisions between Chavistas and anti-Chavistas became so intense that outsiders were called in three times to try to bridge the divide.

International mediation 2002–2004

Following the short-lived coup against Chávez in April 2002, the government and the multisectoral opposition Coordinadora Democrática invited the Organization of American States, the United Nations Development Program, and the nongovernmental organization Carter Center to facilitate a dialogue to restore governability. After seven months of negotiations carried out alongside street protests and a nationwide strike, the government and the opposition signed an agreement in May 2003 that envisioned an electoral solution to the political crisis in the form of a presidential recall referendum. Chávez won the referendum in a lopsided vote of 59 percent to 41 percent.

At the end of the more-than-two-year intervention, Venezuelans had managed to avoid the widespread bloodshed that many thought likely in July 2002 and largely resolved the question of the legitimacy of President Chávez’s mandate through the defeat of a recall initiative to shorten his term in office. Even so, the society remained polarized; a large number of citizens questioned the validity of the recall vote; and the underlying elements of the dispute remained unresolved, such as conflict over whether and how to guarantee a separation of powers and independent political institutions, the role of the state in the economy, whether and

how resources should be redistributed to address social exclusion and inequality, and what constitutes legitimate and effective political participation and representation. The ultimate goal of preventing violence was achieved, but the underlying issues producing polarization and new forms of political exclusion were not resolved.

International mediation 2014–2015

Ten years later, Chávez had consolidated partisan control of most institutions in the country but continued to personally dominate decision making. After his death in 2013, the latent polarization reemerged following the close election of Maduro in April 2013 and erupted in large street protests in early 2014. In 2002–2003 the opposition had pursued a two-prong strategy of street pressure and negotiations, followed by an electoral strategy when the former failed to dislodge Chávez from power. In 2014, the political opposition divided over a shorter-term strategy of protests to force Maduro to resign (“La Salida”), and a longer-term strategy of building on the electoral strength exhibited in 2013.

A new regional organization, the South American Union (UNASUR), was called in by the government to facilitate a dialogue in May 2014, while the opposition unsuccessfully sought to add the Vatican to the team (the government agreed on the Vatican but the Pope was reluctant to get involved at that time). UNASUR did not have a bureaucracy to provide a permanent presence or technical expertise to the three foreign ministers tasked with mediating the crisis in short-term visits to the country, and the dialogue eventually sputtered out along with the street protests.

International mediation 2016

A deepening social and economic crisis fueled by food, medicine, and currency shortages, accompanied by a strong opposition push for a recall referendum to cut short Maduro's presidential push in 2016, led to the third international mediation attempt. The National Electoral Council postponed the gubernatorial elections expected in December 2016 and suspended the recall referendum process in October 2016. Immediately following these actions, President Maduro reinitiated attempts to involve the Vatican, and this time the Pope agreed, joining forces with UNASUR to initiate a new dialogue in November 2016. One month later, that dialogue was suspended when the opposition accused the government of failing to match the initial concessions the opposition had made.

Lessons from Past Efforts, Steps toward the Future

An exclusive focus on an electoral solution is insufficient.

In polarized contexts, the incumbent is motivated to stay in power at all costs, and opponents are united largely by their desire to remove the incumbent leader or party from power. Though elections or recall referenda are the legitimate means to accomplish these goals, an exclusive focus on this strategy and endgame, as happened in the 2002–2004 conflict, will not establish the foundations needed for a society to move forward. These foundations include depoliticized institutions, compliance with an agreed-on set of rules of the game, and solving critical policy issues such as jump-starting the economy or resolving humanitarian crisis.

In 2002, some of the same substantive issues were present as exist today: lack of separation of powers, reliance on decree laws bypassing the legislature, insecurity and a highly armed citizenry, and calls for a truth commission. But the focus of the two sides in that early conflict was on control of the executive. The 2003 negotiated agreement included (unfulfilled) commitments to disarm citizens and establish a truth commission but focused on carrying out the constitutional provision for a recall referendum process. The referendum vote confirmed Chávez's legitimacy to remain in power and was rejected by a significant portion of the opposition; no new rules of the game or independent institutions were agreed upon before or after the election; and the polarization deepened.

In the current context, constitutional rights, including voting rights and no arbitrary detention, should be nonnegotiable. However, negotiating a route to depoliticize institutions is needed to provide greater guarantees to protect the rights of both sides should they lose power. Furthermore, negotiating a path to resolve the urgent humanitarian crisis is an obligation of all political leaders to the populace. These negotiations should accompany either the right to exercise a referendum on an ineffective government or a negotiated joint transitional government. But the opposition should resist committing the same mistakes as in 2004, when they relied entirely on an election solution but then failed to accept the results, abstained from elections in 2005, and abdicated any political role.

Incentives are essential to induce change in elite polarizing logics.

In deeply polarized societies, where each side sees the other as an existential threat to their way of life, politics comes

to be seen as a zero-sum game. If I lose power, I face loss of my benefits and possible retribution. If I gain power, I face opportunities for reward but also the risk that the losers will destabilize the country to impede governability. Incentives to change the logic to a positive-sum game are needed. Venezuelans already agree on the constitution as a framework to guarantee rights and duties. What they need now are independent institutions that can protect these rights.

Credibility is also needed. Currently, neither side trusts the other to comply with any commitments they may agree to. Chavistas fear a rollback of the redistributive gains from the Chavista governments, persecution, and witch hunts as happened during the 2002 coup, and perhaps the disappearance of a fair chance to compete again for power in a regular time period. The opposition may fear that they will not be able to govern if they do reach power, lacking control of institutions and arms and possibly facing a scenario such as that in Nicaragua in 1990, when the Sandinistas vowed to "govern from below" and disrupted the Chamorro government with strikes and protests.

The Colombian peace process provides examples of two possible remedies to these dilemmas. First, public distrust of the FARC to actually comply with the commitment to give up arms and violence was abated with small steps and joint actions with the government before the agreement was even finalized: a unilateral cease-fire, a joint demining effort, the return of child soldiers. Second, the negotiators agreed on mechanisms of transitional justice to facilitate the transition of an armed actor to a peaceful political party, including reduced sentences in exchange for acknowledging responsibility and telling the truth about

human rights violations, paying reparations to victims, and guarantees of nonrepetition.

International mediation efforts are stronger when unified, but still insufficient on their own.

The international community can also contribute incentives and disincentives. Following Robert Dahl's recipe for democratization, international condemnation of violations of human rights or democratic principles can raise the costs of repression. Providing good offices to facilitate dialogue can lower the costs of tolerance by providing legitimacy to both sides about their peaceful and democratic bona fides, as long as the facilitators do not allow the negotiations to be used by either side to buy time, make unreasonable demands, or avoid complying with constitutional rights.

The international community has been unwilling to condemn abusive government actions in Venezuela, limiting itself to condemning the 2002 coup attempt against the incumbent, President Chávez. It has been more willing to provide mediation. The Western Hemisphere's collective defense-of-democracy regime was strongest in the first mediation attempt when regional organizations coincided on the principles in the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter, signed unanimously by all countries but Cuba. By 2014, the hemisphere had become polarized and the growing number of regional organizations did not agree on the very concept of democracy, nor did they agree on hemispheric obligations to defend against government violations. UNASUR replaced the Organization of American States (OAS) as the mediator but had neither a protocol for democracy protection beyond defending incumbents in office, nor the bureaucratic structure

to support an ongoing mediation effort (Legler and McCoy 2016). In addition, throughout the three crises, the limits of international influence and leverage were apparent due to Venezuela's significant foreign revenues from petroleum, its own use of petro-diplomacy and aid, and the resulting competing foreign policy interests of regional governments.

By 2016, the OAS had decided to back UNASUR's renewed mediation effort, and hemispheric governments supported the entry of the Vatican, providing more of a united front (McCoy 2016b). The international community will be most effective in helping Venezuela resolve its crises, however, if they carry through on commitments to condemn violations of the Democratic Charter, such as the October 2016 suspension of the recall process and the 2016 gubernatorial elections, while also facilitating dialogue efforts conditional on results.

Bridging divides, generating empathy, and expanding time horizons for social reconciliation

Polarization indicates two camps formed across an impermeable boundary, with mutually exclusive identities and interests. Breaking down those camps to create cross-cutting ties is crucial to reducing polarization. In addition, although negotiations are facilitated by two coherent camps with a single voice, such as the context in 2002 when Chávez personalized power and the Coordinadora Democrática created a more coherent voice for a multifaceted opposition coalition, there is a trade-off. Today, both the government and the opposition are more fragmented, making negotiations less efficient. On the other hand, the fragmentation may create more space and flexibility for dialogue

across the boundary line and the creation of new coalitions.

Overcoming the perceptions of mutually exclusive identities and interests requires a longer-term effort of at least three to five years to help a society build bridges and find shared values once again. Social psychologists emphasize the role of empathy, the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and understand their needs and fears. Exercises such as community work projects can provide a nonthreatening space to bring people together and begin to recognize their shared humanity again, identifying common interests such as safe spaces for children to play in or clean water for neighborhoods. Eventually a shared national identity may be rekindled.

Another mechanism for overcoming polarization is a scenarios exercise, which extends time horizons to envision alternative futures for the society 15 to 20 years in the future (Kahane 2012). By bringing together diverse perspectives to consider the ramifications of specific policies, political strategies, and communication styles, participants will gain a greater shared understanding of the implications of failure to change course.

Finally, another lesson from political psychology involves "motivated reasoning" or "bias confirmation" in which new information that disconfirms one's prior beliefs is simply discarded by an individual (Westen et al. 2006). In polarized contexts, the tendency to accept information that reinforces one's prior perceptions is compounded by the "echo chambers" of sharing like-minded stories and even conspiracies through social media, reliance on single news sources, unwillingness to fact-check sources, and the fake news now created for revenue generation by social media entrepreneurs in foreign

countries. Counteracting these tendencies will require long-term efforts to teach logics of inquiry and scientific methods in education systems, breaking up monopolies of information, and supporting news media professionals.

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