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The paradox of support for democracy in Venezuela

Paolo Moncagatta Alvarado

paolo.moncagatta@upf.edu

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

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ABSTRACT

New democracies have not showed the same patterns of unconditional and generalised support for the democratic regime established, advanced democracies have. It is thus of crucial importance to understand under which particularities are new democracies maintained and legitimized. For this purpose, it is necessary to understand what is influencing mass support for democracy in them. “Support for democracy” has been widely measured in surveys, as it is regarded by many as an indicator of democratic legitimacy. Several questions have aimed to measure citizens’ support of their regimes, seeking in this way a deeper understanding of the quality of democracy.

Using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) 2008 round, I use structural equation modelling to assess the nature of the relationship between trust in the president and authoritative institutions and support for the democratic regime in Venezuela. Two distinct groups emerge from the data: those who show no trust at all towards president Chávez and institutions and those who have great trust towards them. The paradox is that both groups show remarkably high levels of support for the democratic regime. This suggests these different groups have alternative conceptions of what democracy is, and implies the need for the development of new approaches to the measurement of support for democracy.

The paradox of support for democracy in Venezuela

INTRODUCTION

Mass support for democratic rule has gained increasing importance in studies of democracy of the last thirty years, as it has been regarded by scholars as a guarantee of stability for any democratic regime (Lipset 1959, 1994; Easton 1975; Linz 1978; Linz and Stepan 1996; Fuchs et al. 1995; Diamond and Morlino 2004). What Huntington (1991) labelled the “third wave of democratization” brought to being an important number of new, relatively unstable democracies that have undergone different processes of democratic consolidation. These new democracies have not showed the same patterns of unconditional and generalized support for the democratic regime as established, advanced democracies have (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Bratton 2002; Sarsfield and Echegaray 2006, 2008; Lagos 2008). It is thus of crucial importance to understand how new democracies are maintained and legitimized. For this purpose, it is necessary to bring light to what is influencing the perceived levels of support for democracy in them. In this paper, I will analyze what is happening in the specific case of Venezuela, a country which shows interesting and highly relevant particularities for the scope of this analysis.

Support for democracy in this context refers to the belief that democracy is the best form of government for a given society. According to Linz, support for democracy is defined as “the belief that, in spite of shortcomings and failures, the political institutions are better than any others that might be established” (1978; pg. 16). This definition has been widely accepted and has served as basis for the development of survey items seeking to measure popular support for democracy in questionnaires and research studies in a number of new democracies¹. Other definitions of support for democracy follow the same line: Gunther and Montero (2006) talk about citizens’ beliefs in that democratic politics and representative democratic institutions are the most appropriate framework of government for a given society.

¹ Empirical research programs which are monitoring public support for democratic institutions in new democracies include the LatinoBarometer, the AfroBarometer, the New Democracies Barometer, the European Values Survey and the World Values Survey, among others.

In this line, Easton's (1975) differentiation among the objects of the political system becomes an important theoretical tool for understanding how citizens express their support towards the inputs and outputs of the political system. His categorization of objects of political support and the complementary definition of specific and diffuse kinds (1965, 1975) has served as a basis for the majority of research dealing with political systems and their stability. However, while the basic distinction of specific and diffuse support has gained acceptance among academics, there are still questions left unanswered about the specificities this distinction may present when other variables dealing with political functioning, economic performance and cultural background are taken into account. Among the possibilities of refinement left to be done in Easton's original theory, appear the puzzles that deal with the presence of different dimensions in both the "specific" and "diffuse" kinds of support, and the special forms the relationships between these dimensions could assume in different contexts. Easton himself suggests that "it is the unpredictability of the relationship between political dissatisfaction and tension on the one hand and the acceptance of basic political arrangements on the other that constitutes a persistent puzzle for research" (1975: pg. 437).

Easton departs from the argument that "support is not all of a piece" (1975: pg. 437) to differentiate two types of political support: specific and diffuse. These two kinds of support, he argues, have different characteristics and consequences for political systems. Specific support is directed towards incumbent political authorities and authoritative institutions, and is related to the satisfaction members of a system obtain from these outputs. Diffuse support is extended towards offices themselves, to what "an object is or represents – to the general meaning it has for a person – not of what it does" (1975: pg. 444). In this sense diffuse support is also described as a generalized, "unconditional" support for the democratic regime. It tends to be more durable than the specific kind, and will normally be independent of outputs and performance in the short run.

The original idea of Easton was that people who showed diffuse support for the system would in general accept the authorities chosen through that system. But they could also lose trust in the authorities while maintaining their support for the system. Easton

argues that “typically, members of a political system may find themselves opposed to the political authorities, disquieted by their policies, dissatisfied with their conditions of life and, where they have the opportunity, prepared to throw the incumbents out of office. At times such conditions may lead to fundamental political or social change. Yet at other times, in spite of widespread discontent, there appears to be little loss of confidence in the regime – the underlying order or political life – or of identification with the political community. Political discontent is not always, or even usually, the signal for basic political change” (1975: pg. 436). Diffuse support and low levels of specific support can live together: up to a certain threshold, they are independent of each other.

It is from these ideas on the nature of the political system that my research departs. The main concern of my paper will be to take a closer look at the relationship between specific and diffuse support in the country of Venezuela. The specific support dimension will be observed through variables dealing with citizens’ perceptions of democratic performance, such as trust in authoritative institutions, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and evaluation of the country’s economic performance. The diffuse dimension of support will be observed through the variable “support for democracy”, based on a survey item that explicitly asks for citizens’ attitudes towards the system².

Several questions arise from the start: how solid is mass support for democracy in Venezuela? Is it all of “one-piece”? What is the most appropriate way to measure it? What is influencing it? In the end, this research might be considered as a first step for acquiring a better understanding of the meaning of the concept “support for democracy”. Does it refer to the same attitude everywhere, or does it acquire particular meanings in different democracies? Might citizens in determined regions be confusing “support for democracy” with something else? (i.e. trust in the president). Is “support for democracy” as “diffuse” as Easton argued in all contexts? The scope of this paper is not broad enough to elaborate on all of these questions; however, important practical and theoretical conclusions may be found that might bring light to the nature of the relationship between specific and diffuse support in new democracies.

² For wording of all questions used see Appendix 1.

THE MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

In advanced democracies the consolidated status of unconditional, majoritarian support for the democratic regime has been repeatedly confirmed. These established democracies are characterized by a vast majority of citizens who agree on that democracy is the best and always preferable political system of government (Dalton 1999; Klingemann 1999). Support for the democratic system is considered a given fact in North America and Western Europe, to the point that the European Social Survey, possibly the most important survey monitoring public attitudes in Europe, has omitted questions on the subject³. Europeans have, in general, a positive attitude towards the ideal of democracy. This does not mean they are satisfied with the way it works in their countries: in fact, many countries show relatively low levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy coexisting with an overwhelming agreement on the support for the system (Lagos 2003b). But it does mean that the democratic ideal has found a safe place in the European public.

In new democracies, however, the picture is somewhat different. Levels of support for the democratic regime have shown to vary significantly across countries (Lagos 2003b), implying that there are important groups of citizens yet to be convinced by the democratic ideals. Furthermore, support for democracy in these contexts has shown to be volatile, as Lagos shows for the Latin American region, where it can depend on evaluations of the economic and political situations, and partisan and ideological variations (2003a, 2008). Support for the regime in these democracies is not unconditional as in well established democracies: it has been studied that in newly democratic regimes citizens show a strong presence of utilitarian and instrumental reasoning in their evaluations of support for the democratic system (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Bratton 2002; Sarsfield and Echeagaray 2006, 2008). Economical and political performance have shown to play an important role in citizens' attitudes towards the regime, as well as the dissatisfaction with the way the system is functioning, discontent with high levels of corruption and a perception of general lack of receptivity of the political representatives (Diamond 2002).

³ In the round 3 questionnaire of the European Social Survey (ESS) an item is included asking about "satisfaction with the function of democracy", but no items asking for "support for democracy" are found. Please see the questionnaire at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

These findings imply that in new democracies the differentiation between specific and diffuse kinds of support is not necessarily as clear as Easton argues, and as has been confirmed in old democracies. Departing from this point, I propose a model to test if these findings are correct for the Venezuelan case. The model suggests that the linkages between the evaluations of current economic conditions, trust in institutions, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and support for the democratic regime may bring light to what is influencing democratic support in Venezuela.

The model departs from the assumption that specific support in Venezuela will have a positive and significant influence on the level of diffuse support. In this sense, support for democracy will be affected by the levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and the levels of trust in political institutions, as well as the evaluation of the country's economic conditions. If this is true, citizens that are more satisfied with the way democracy is functioning in Venezuela, and who have more trust in institutions should tend to be more supportive of the democratic system in general. A positive finding in this respect could be taken as evidence for arguing that the separation between specific and diffuse supports is not so clearly established for the Venezuelan people.

The model also suggests that the evaluation of the economic situation of the country by the citizens should have a positive effect on the dimension of specific support. In the model, both variables pertaining to this domain, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and trust in authoritative institutions, are directly influenced by evaluation of economic situation. This is in line with what has been suggested repeatedly by researchers: specific support will be responsive to performance in the economic and political spheres. Venezuelans who evaluate better the economic situation of their country should tend to have more trust on institutions and to be more satisfied with the way democracy is working for them.

In summary, the model poses that evaluation of the country's economic situation will have a direct effect on specific support, and that specific support will have a direct effect on diffuse support. This implies that the economic evaluation, besides having a direct effect on diffuse support, will have an indirect effect on it as well, suggesting

diffuse support in Venezuela is also being responsive to performance and not unconditional, like it is supposed to be.

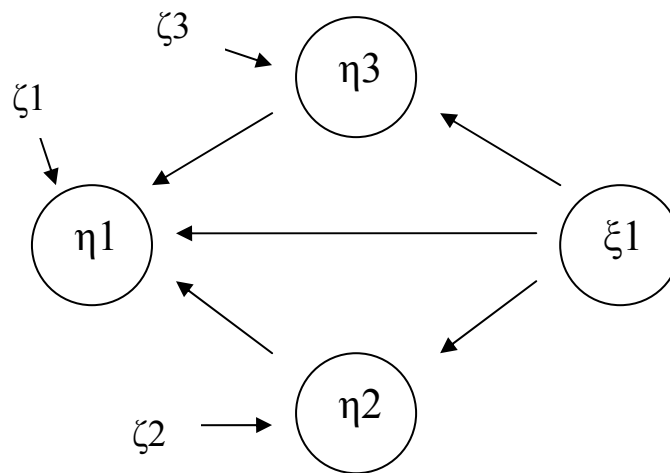
In this sense, three hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1: Support for democracy will be affected by satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, trust in institutions and evaluation of economic performance.

Hypothesis 2: Levels of trust in institutions will also be affected by the evaluation of the country's current economic performance.

Hypothesis 3: Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy will be affected by the evaluation of the country's current economic performance.

ORIGINAL MODEL



η1 = support for democracy (latent)
η2 = trust in institutions (latent)
η3 = satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (latent)
ξ1 = evaluation of country's current economic situation (latent)

DATA

The analysis in this paper was conducted using the data from Venezuela of the third wave of the AmericasBarometer, conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion

Project (LAPOP)⁴ in 2008. The AmericasBarometer uses national probability samples of voting-age adults. In the 2008 round, 23 countries throughout the Americas were included, and over 36,000 individuals were interviewed⁵. For Venezuela, the sample was made up of 1500 individuals, of which 55% were females.

Seven were the questions from the survey used to specify the model. Four of them relate to trust in authorities or authoritative institutions: trust in the president, trust in congress, trust in the juridical system and trust in political parties. Then there was the question that asked respondents to evaluate their country's current economic situation. The last two questions used are related to democracy: one asks how satisfied you are with the functioning of democracy in the country (specific support) and the second asks up to what extent you agree in that democracy is the best form of government possible (diffuse support). For details on the exact wording of the questions and the scales used please refer to appendix 1.

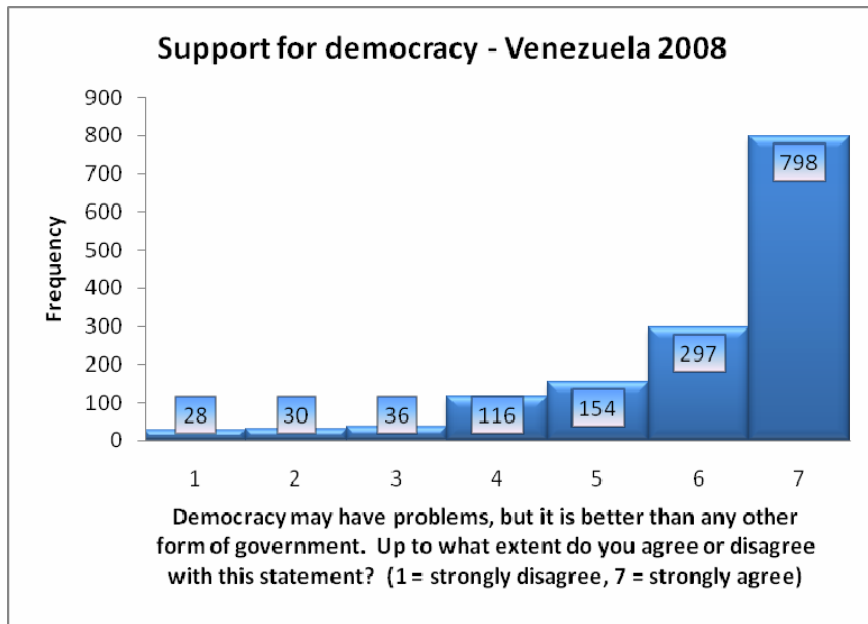
MEASUREMENT

The questions and their distributions.-

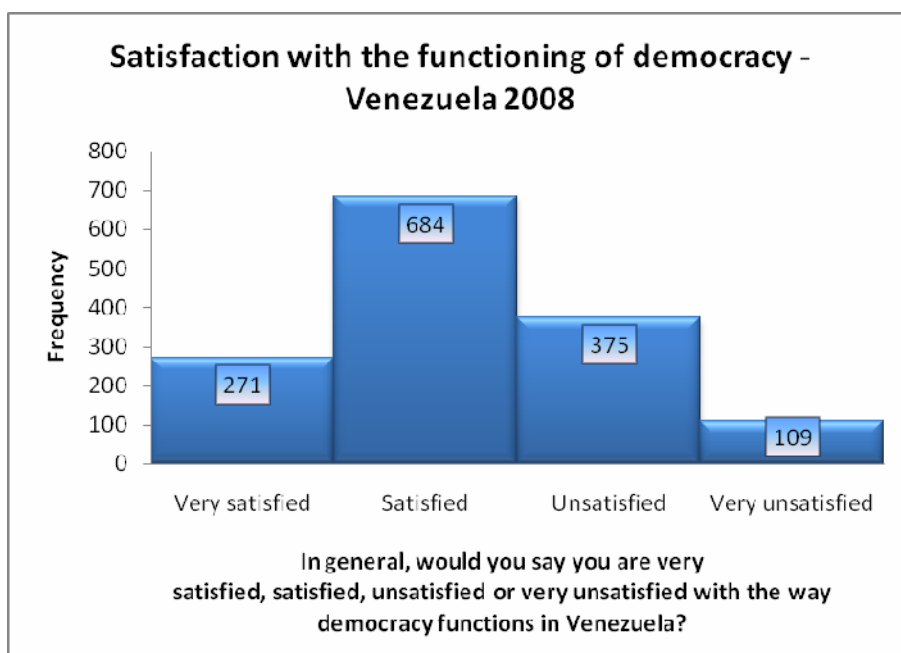
Before proceeding to specify the model it will be interesting to look at the distribution of the responses to the questions that will be used in the analysis. Venezuelans seem to have strong support for democracy: the negatively skewed distribution of the responses to the question if democracy "is better than any other form of government" clearly suggests so. More than half of the sample gives the highest score possible ("strongly agrees") with the statement proposed (see graph below), and only around 7% of the sample seems to disagree with the statement in some sense (scores 1 through 3).

⁴ I thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.

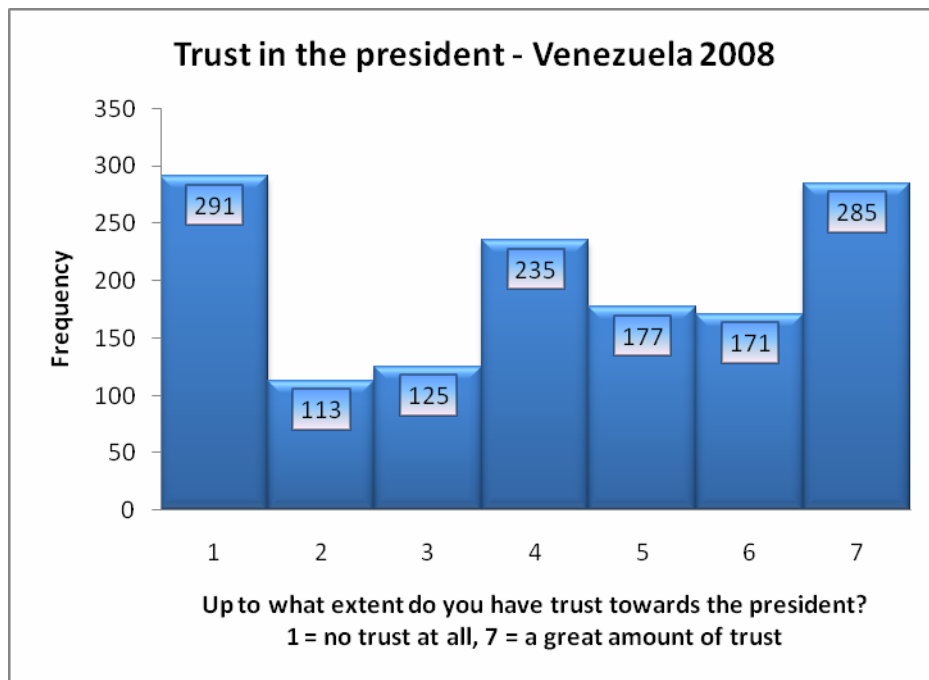
⁵ For more details on the LAPOP, the AmericasBarometer series of surveys and the specificities of the 2008 wave please visit www.LapopSurveys.org



When it comes to Venezuelans' levels of satisfaction with democracy, the distribution approaches the normal curve. It is interesting, however, to see that more than 65% of the respondents seem to be at least "satisfied" with how democracy is functioning in their country. This number is higher than what most European countries get for this question; using data from the Eurobarometer 2000, Lagos shows that only Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Ireland show levels of satisfaction with democracy higher than 65% (Lagos 2003b: pg. 474).

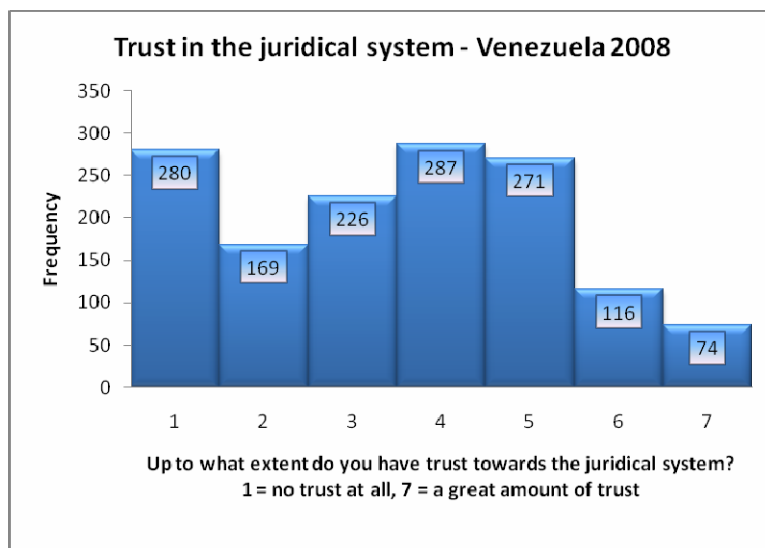
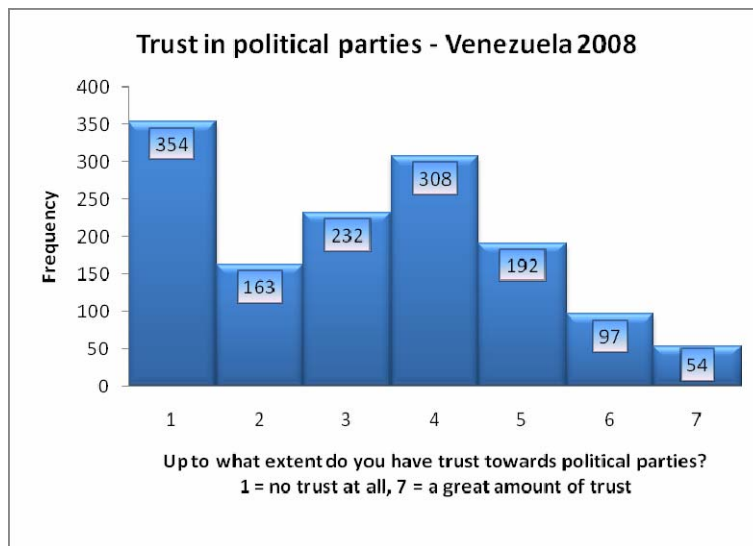
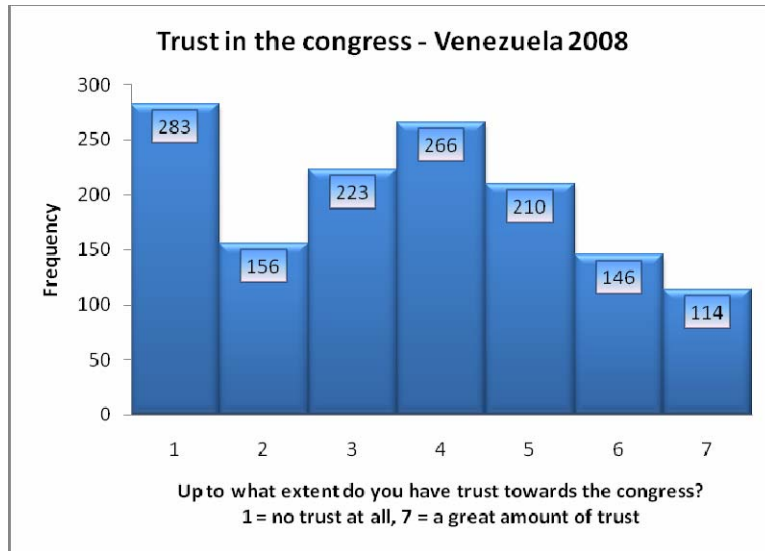


Venezuelan society shows a polarization among its individuals that is evident when looking at the levels of trust in the president citizens express. When asked to give a score from one to seven on the “extent to which they have trust towards the president”, two important groups emerge from the distribution of the responses: those who have no trust at all towards the president and those who have great trust towards Hugo Chávez.



Close to three hundred respondents answered they have “no trust at all” towards president Chávez while a similar number said they have great trust towards him. The two peaks of the distribution –one at each end of the scale – is a clear sign of the magnitude of the polarization of the Venezuelan people in this matter. While there is a group that has moderate feelings regarding trust in the president, almost half of the sample located themselves in one of the two extreme positions.

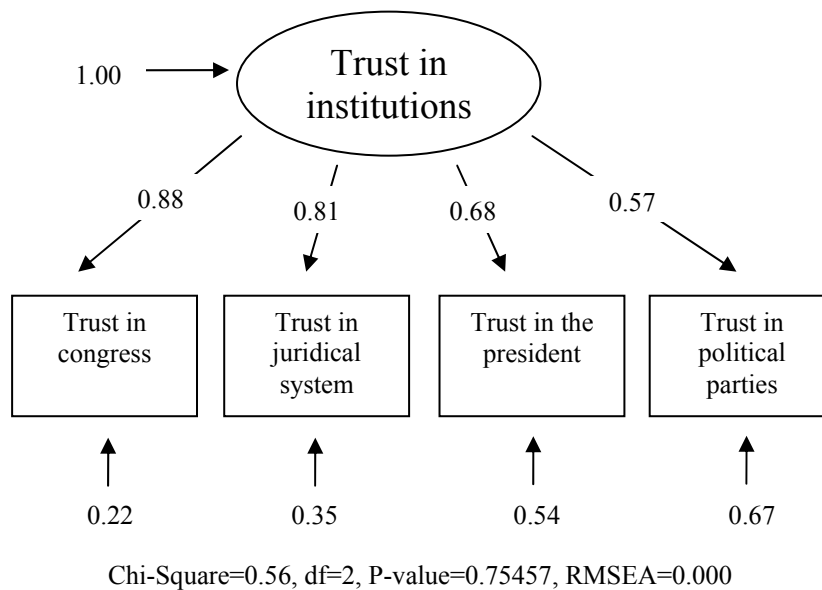
While trust in the president shows a bimodal distribution with two peaks at the extreme positions, trust in congress, the juridical system, and political parties all show results which approach the normal distribution curve. There is clearly one important group who shows no trust for any political institution (scores of 1 in all three variables), which amounts to around a fifth of the sample. But besides this group, the rest of the distributions approach normality.



Correction for measurement error.-

Survey items are not measured perfectly; they include random and systematic measurement errors that might attenuate the strength of the relationships between variables (Sarlis and Gallhofer 2007). In order to estimate the size of the random and systematic measurements errors and be able to correct for measurement error in the model proposed two different approaches were followed⁶.

The first approach involves estimating a model with at least two observed indicators for each latent variable present. In the original model, the latent variable “trust in institutions” fulfils this requirement, as there are four indicators for it: trust in the congress, juridical system, president and political parties. Using these four observed variables, estimates of the quality of the indicators were obtained using factor analysis. The following graphic summarizes the estimates obtained with the factor analysis model:



The second approach involves estimating the measurement error variance by means of the program “Survey Quality Prediction (SQP)” (Oberski et al. 2007)⁷. Three latent variables in the model – “support for democracy”, “satisfaction with the functioning of democracy” and “evaluation of country’s current economic situation” - only have one

⁶ For a detailed explanation on the two approaches followed here to correct for measurement error refer to Sarlis and Gallhofer’s (2007) chapter 15 “Correction for measurement error in survey data analysis”.

⁷ See <http://www.sqp.nl/>

observed indicator each, and thus, this approach had to be followed for them. The quality of each measure in these cases can be obtained by SQP by introducing information about the wording of the question, its position on the questionnaire and the way data has been collected. The total qualities estimated for all the variables in stake is summarized in the table below:

Variable	Quality	Source⁸
Support for democracy	0.70	Survey Quality Prediction (SQP)
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0.84	Survey Quality Prediction (SQP)
Evaluation of country's current economic situation	0.90	Survey Quality Prediction (SQP)
Trust in the president	0.46*	Factor analysis (LISREL measurement model)
Trust in congress	0.77*	Factor analysis (LISREL measurement model)
Trust in the juridical system	0.66*	Factor analysis (LISREL measurement model)
Trust in political parties	0.32*	Factor analysis (LISREL measurement model)

* the qualities obtained with factor analysis are calculated by squaring the loadings obtained in the model.

RESULTS

Once the total quality was obtained for each of the measured indicators, the original model was estimated using structural equation modelling. To introduce the corrections for measurement errors in the model, the qualities obtained from SQP were introduced in the diagonal of the correlation matrix. As well, the factor model shown above was included in the final full structural equation model. In this way the correction for measurement error in the variable trust in institutions was automatically made.

The effects found for the original model, after correction for measurement error are summarized in the table below:

⁸ The estimates of the total quality for the variables "support for democracy", "satisfaction with the functioning of democracy" and "evaluation of country's current economic situation" were obtained using the program "Survey Quality Prediction" developed by Oberski, Saris and Kuipers (2005). The estimates of the total quality for the four trust variables were obtained through a LISREL measurement model and are, in fact, the product of the quality coefficient and the consistency coefficient they show in relation to the latent variable "trust in institutions".

Direct Effects (Betas and Gammas) ORIGINAL MODEL	Standardized estimate	T-value
Economic situation → support for democracy	-0.08	-1.64
Economic situation → satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0.52	16.94
Economic situation → trust in institutions	-0.54	-15.43
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy → support for democracy	-0.18	-4.53
Trust in institutions → support for democracy	-0.14	-2.98

The reported goodness of fit statistics of the original estimated model are:

Chi-Square=307.14	df=12	p-value=0.00000	RMSEA=0.177
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Correction for misspecification.-

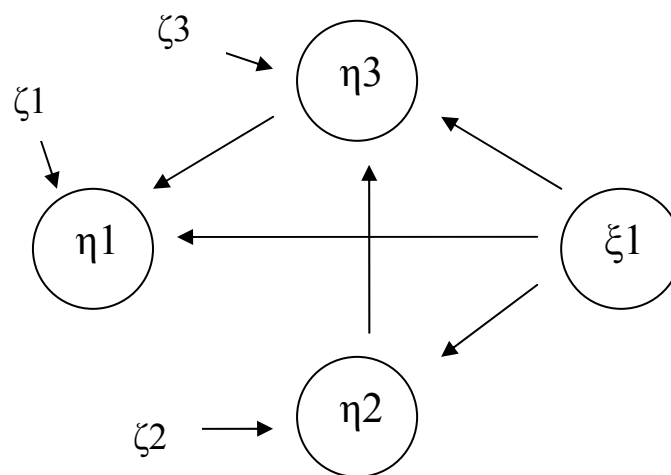
The lack of fit of the original model suggests misspecifications might be present in it. Two measures were adopted to correct for possible misspecifications. The first measure adopted was to fix to 0 the effect of η_2 (trust in institutions) on η_1 (support for democracy). This decision was adopted when taking into consideration both practical and theoretical considerations. It can be seen that a negative effect is estimated from trust in institutions towards support for democracy. In the original model it was hypothesized that trust in institutions (and specially trust in the president) may have had a positive effect on support for democracy, and finding a small, negative effect seems enough evidence to remove the effect from the model. There is no logical reason for finding a negative effect between trust in democratic institutions and general support for the democratic regime, and thus I assume this effect is non-existent, and proceed to remove it from the model. In fact, if we go back to theoretical grounds, the decision to remove the effect is in accordance with Easton's ideas about specific and diffuse kinds of support not being necessarily related. If we accept, following Easton, that citizens may lose trust in their authorities and authoritative institutions while maintaining their

support for the system (1975), the removal of the effect in stake seems not only reasonable, but necessary.

The second modification to the original model was adopted after revising the modification indices and expected parameters changes that result from the estimation of the original model. The MIs and EPCs suggest the effect of η_2 (trust in institutions) on η_3 (satisfaction with democracy) should be introduced. This is, again, perfectly understandable in theoretical terms: the more trust in institutions a person feels the more satisfied with the democracy he or she will be. And if again we refer to Easton's systems theory, the introduction of this effect finds solid theoretical support. Trust in institutions and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy are both found on the same generalization level, both being sensitive to economic fluctuations and to perceived performance (Easton 1965, 1975).

With the two modifications introduced, the adjusted model looks like this:

ADJUSTED MODEL



The adjusted model was again estimated with structural equation modelling using LISREL, and the parameters found are summarized in the following tables:

Direct Effects (Betas and Gammas)	Standardized estimate	T-value
Economic situation → support for democracy	-0.04	-0.88
Economic situation → satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0.20	6.05
Economic situation → trust in institutions	-0.55	-15.69
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy → support for democracy	-0.12	-3.02
Trust in institutions → satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	-0.58	-15.19

Total effects	Standardized estimate	T-value
Economic situation → support for democracy	-0.10	-2.84
Economic situation → satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0.52	16.94
Economic situation → trust in institutions	-0.55	-15.69
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy → support for democracy	-0.12	-3.02
Trust in institutions → satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	-0.58	-15.19
Trust in institutions → support for democracy	0.07	2.96

Squared Multiple Correlations for Structural Equations	
Support for democracy	0.02
Trust in institutions	0.30
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	0.50

Chi-Square=148.16	df=12	p-value=0.00000	RMSEA=0.12
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The high value of the chi square may imply the model is not fitting. However, inspection of the modification indices and expected parameter changes suggest no

further misspecifications are found in the model. Thus, I proceed to leave the model like it is and analyse its results.

DISCUSSION

I will take a look first at the variable “support for democracy”, the main variable of interest in this paper. It was posed in hypothesis 1 that support for the democracy would be influenced by satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, trust in institutions and the evaluation of the country’s current economic situation. The percentage of explained variation of this variable is only of 2%, and if we keep in mind that the total variation support for democracy presents is not very high, this number becomes insignificant.

Having said this, it might still be interesting to analyze the effects estimated. While the evaluation of the country’s current economic situation does not have a significant direct effect on support for democracy, it does show a small, significant, positive⁹ total effect. This means the influence economic conditions are having on democratic support is going through two paths: one via satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and another one going first through trust in institutions and then through satisfaction with democracy. However, even if the effect is statistically significant, it is so small substantially (especially when considering the very low explained total variance for support for democracy) that it seems safe to conclude that Venezuelans are not subduing their support for the democratic regime to their evaluation of the economy.

Satisfaction with democracy has a small, significant, positive direct effect on support for democracy, which in turn amounts to be the total effect, as it is the only relationship specified in the model between these variables. Again, while the effect is statistically significant, it is substantially quasi non-existent. The same with the effect trust in institutions has on support for democracy: the direct effect was already removed from the model in the correction for misspecifications stage, and now the variable shows a significant, positive, but once again quite small total effect on democratic support.

⁹ Keep in mind the direction of each variable’s scale (see appendix 1)

The small percentage of explained variance of democratic support comes from a combination of the direct effects of the evaluation of country's current economic situation and satisfaction with democracy. Both effects are similar in magnitude and direction – both are small and positive. This seems like enough evidence to reject hypothesis 1: support for democracy in Venezuela is barely being affected by the three explanatory variables introduced in the model. At first sight, Easton's assumptions are in fact correct for our case; specific support is only showing a very small influence on diffuse support. Support for democracy seems to be coming from somewhere else in Venezuela's case.

When it comes to analyzing the variable "trust in institutions", it can be observed that an important 30% of its variance can be explained by the evaluation of economic situation by itself. This effect is statistically significant and can be considered quite large in absolute terms: it implies, in accordance to the theory, that trust in authorities and authoritative institutions is being directly affected by citizens' immediate perception of economical (and political) outputs. Venezuelans tend to trust their authorities more when the economy is doing better. It seems safe to accept hypothesis 2.

Remarkable is the total explained variance of the variable "satisfaction with the functioning of democracy". Half of the variability of the responses to this question is being determined by the combination of the effects economic evaluation and trust in institutions have in it. While the direct effects give the impression that trust in institutions has a much greater influence on it than economic evaluation, when looking at the total effects, it is clear that the influence the two explanatory variables have on the *explanandum* are similar in magnitude. Both effects go in the proposed direction as well, and thus, hypothesis 3 can be partially accepted. While it was originally proposed that satisfaction with the functioning with democracy would be influenced solely by evaluation of economic conditions, the hypothesis has to be modified to include the positive and significant effect trust in institutions has in it. With the results estimated from the adjusted model, it may be concluded that satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is being directly influenced both by economic evaluation and trust in institutions, and also indirectly influenced by economic evaluation through the path that goes through trust in institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

The implicit question guiding this research was: what is affecting the level of support for democracy in Venezuela? While no clear answer to this question has resulted from the analysis conducted, important conclusions can be derived from it, which may enlighten the path further research in this area must follow. In this section I will take a look at what the implications of the results obtained for each of the variables at stake are, and will propose several questions that may be of use for other studies concerning democratic consolidation in Latin America.

There is coherence in what Venezuelan citizens display in their survey responses regarding trust. To begin with, trust in the political system goes together in one piece: people who trust the president are more likely to trust the congress, as well as political parties and the juridical system. However, there is evidence that “trust in the president” may be a variable that should be looked at by itself and not in conjunction with the other institutions; the bimodal distribution the variable presents is different from the distribution of the other three variables, and this suggests citizens are evaluating president Chávez in a unique way, distinct from their evaluations of the other institutions. This in turn could suggest that the effect “trust in the president” has in other variables of the political system may be different from the ones “trust in institutions” shows.

Even though there was no significant effect found between trust in institutions and support for the democratic system, there are things that can be concluded regarding trust in the president and its relationship to democratic support. The table below shows there is no significant difference in mean level of support for democracy for the different scores of trust in the president. All of them show a mean of around 6 points of support for the democratic regime, including the 84 respondents who were coded as “don’t know” answers. In fact, the groups at the two extremes, the ones answering they have “no trust at all” and the ones answering they have “a great amount of trust” show almost exactly the same mean (6.33 vs. 6.34), which, furthermore, are the highest levels any of the groups express.

Support for democracy by different scores of Trust in the president

Trust in the president		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
No trust at all	Support for democracy	285	1	7	6,33	1,387
	Valid N (listwise)	285				
2	Support for democracy	110	1	7	5,73	1,791
	Valid N (listwise)	110				
3	Support for democracy	123	1	7	5,67	1,647
	Valid N (listwise)	123				
4	Support for democracy	232	2	7	6,00	1,337
	Valid N (listwise)	232				
5	Support for democracy	176	1	7	5,77	1,299
	Valid N (listwise)	176				
6	Support for democracy	167	1	7	5,80	1,268
	Valid N (listwise)	167				
A great amount of trust	Support for democracy	282	1	7	6,34	1,210
	Valid N (listwise)	282				
Don't know	Support for democracy	84	1	7	6,01	1,572
	Valid N (listwise)	84				

As seen, there is, on one hand, an important group who has great trust on president Hugo Chávez and has shown high levels of democratic support. On the other hand, there is another important group which has no trust at all towards the president but still expresses high levels of support for democracy. It has been shown that there is no significant difference in terms of these groups' levels of support for democracy, and this suggests various understandings of what democracy is are present in the Venezuelan population. Can a person who does not trust Hugo Chávez at all (and probably sees him as a dictator – a label commonly used for him amongst his oppositors) but expresses a high level of support for democracy be talking about the same “democracy” as someone who has great trust in him, sees him as a democrat, and thus expresses a high level of “support for democracy”? While it is outside the scope of this paper to define the different “democracies” these groups are supporting (they may as well be more than two, as there might be different conceptions of what “democracy” is even within groups), it seems safe to conclude there is no understanding among the Venezuelan population on what democracy is. It may be argued from this evidence that the group of citizens who trust Chávez think of their present system as democratic and thus support it, while his opponents think of how democracy should be, and thus support the concept as well.

This conclusion, which may seem very simple and straight-forward, brings some complications on to what function the item measuring “support for democracy” is

fulfilling in survey questionnaires in Venezuela. It is clear that any research that wishes to measure mass support for the democratic system in this country has to include – besides the indicators directly asking for levels of support for democracy- other indicators that will take into account people’s different understandings of what democracy means. It is of no use to measure a society’s level of support for democracy if several meanings for democracy are present among its citizens; in the end, the validity of this indicator may be seriously affected by the presence of these different understandings of the concept under study.

In this line, problematic as well is to consider a heterogeneous understanding of support for democracy –such as the one Venezuelans are expressing- as a bedrock of stability for the system. Is the high level of support for democracy found in Venezuela really a guarantee of stability for the regime? Or do the different –and to some point encountered- understandings of democracy pose a threat to democratic institutions and regime in general? It may be argued in this case that while at a first glance democracy is not in crisis in Venezuela, the profound polarization of Venezuelan society may be in fact an indicator of the fragility of its democracy.

Satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela appears to be greatly determined by citizens’ perceptions of the immediate outputs of the political system, be them evaluations of the economic situation of their country or levels of the trust they have towards authorities. But again, if we consider the different meanings of “democracy” that may be present in the Venezuelan society, it could be argued that the validity of the “satisfaction with democracy” indicator has problems. Are people actually satisfied with the functioning of democracy or are just reacting to fluctuations of economic performance?

These differences in understandings of what democracy means are fundamental for any research trying to unveil what the meaning of support for democracy is in different contexts. It is clear that democracy does not mean the same for everyone, and thus, that the reported levels of support for democracy in many cases are not saying what they seem to be saying. Researchers, question design teams, and scholars in general should be sensitive to this if any clear understanding of how citizens in new democracies relate to their regime is to be found.

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APPENDIX 1

Indicators used in the analysis, as they appear on the AmericasBarometer 2008 version questionnaire for Venezuela.

Support for democracy – Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. Up to what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (1=disagree strongly, 7=agree strongly)

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy – In general, would you say you are very satisfied, satisfied, unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the way democracy functions in Venezuela? (1=very satisfied, 2=satisfied, 3=unsatisfied, 4=very unsatisfied)

Evaluation of country's current economic situation – Now, regarding economy...How would you qualify the country's economic situation? Would you say it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad? (1=very good, 2=good, 3=neither good nor bad (regular), 4=bad, 5=very bad)

Trust in the president - Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "none" and 7 "a great amount", please give a score to the following question: Up to what extent do you have trust towards the president? (1= none, 7= a great amount).

Trust in congress - Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "none" and 7 "a great amount", please give a score to the following question: Up to what extent do you have trust towards congress? (1= none, 7= a great amount).

Trust in the juridical system - Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "none" and 7 "a great amount", please give a score to the following question: Up to what extent do you have trust towards the juridical system? (1= none, 7= a great amount).

Trust in political parties - Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "none" and 7 "a great amount", please give a score to the following question: Up to what extent do you have trust towards political parties? (1= none, 7= a great amount).