

THE DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS IN VENEZUELA: 1972 AND 2002

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thinking about democratic consensus in the context of Venezuela in 1972 and 2002 evokes images of something lost: agreement on basic norms, operating principles, commonly shared resources and institutions in which political opponents could agree to work together. Many of these elements did indeed characterize the political arrangements of post-1958 democracy, and to the extent that we define consensus in terms of what was built in that period, the element of loss is palpable. Although there is loss, and loss of consensus has clear consequences for the way politics is carried on, more is at issue than just loss. The Venezuela of 2002 is a very different society than the Venezuela of 1972. Understanding the changes of these three decades is essential to explaining the decay of the kind of consensus put in place in 1972, and the real possibilities of building a new kind of political consensus.

II. THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS

As a concept, consensus has been used in many different, although related, ways. The most common usage points are either on norms or common ideological framework, or on a group of facts. In this sense, consensus can be about ideas and values, or about substantive issues or policies. A related usage directs attention to procedures, to agreement over how things are to be done, where decisions are to be taken, what resources are to be employed or accepted as decisive. Both ideological and procedural consensuses are important parts of any political process. Ideological or goal oriented consensus gets people together to act for a common end; procedural consensus makes it possible for them to cooperate even if they may not agree on a specific measure or goal, and to accept the results as legitimate, even in cases where their preferred outcome does not happen. In this latter sense, procedural consensus has to do with the

construction of common institutions and the recognition of these institutions and their rules as decisive. With agreement on the procedures of elections, or courts, those in opposing camps would be bound (and feel obliged) to recognize outcomes as legitimate, and accept them even if their particular side loses. The construction of procedural consensus is an important component of social and political peace. Procedural consensus can be fragile, and its continuing validity is never automatic: all major parties must work at maintaining it.

The practical opposite of consensus would be polarization, a situation that in which groups are so totally divided and agreement (substantive or procedural) so limited as to make common action impossible. Extremes of polarization make it difficult for opposing groups to work within the same institutions and to accept the legitimacy of the outcomes they produce, particularly if they consistent losers over the long term. This was clearly the case for opponents of *Acción Democrática* in the 1945-48 *trienio*. Contemplating the enormous majorities AD got, opposing groups concluded that it was impossible to win by playing according to these rules and therefore joined in coalitions to overthrow the regime in November 1948. The lessons that the leadership of major parties like AD, COPEIU and URD drew from the *trienio* underscored the importance of controlling polarization by building institutions to channel and control conflict.

Agreement, whether procedural, ideological, or substantive, is necessary but not sufficient for democratic consensus. To be democratic in the modern world, political rules and arrangements must meet other criteria: there must effective universal suffrage, barriers to information and organization must be reasonable and as low as possible, and there must be multiple points of access to power for citizens. A rule of law in place must treat citizens equally and equitably and there must be open and reasonably equal access to the institutions of the law. There is a further condition of democratic consensus, of growing importance in the contemporary world: political processes must be as open as possible to citizen judgment and evaluation. Transparency and accessibility are critical components, along with accountability. Those who take decisions must also be accountable to citizens in regular, knowable, and open ways.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have put together in one statement what in reality was an evolution, an incremental process. The early construction of democratic consensus after 1958 valued democracy as a goal, emphasized procedures, and rested its claim to legitimacy on representative governments elected through mass suffrage in free and fair elections. The contrast to historical Venezuelan patterns of arbitrary military rule is patent. As we shall see, the institutions that resulted made

political parties central actors and enhanced the autonomy of professional politicians. Subsequent calls to reform and “deepen” this democratic system centered attention precisely on the need for greater transparency, accountability and equity, for lowering barriers to organization, and for multiple points of access through a series of institutional reforms including decentralization, increasing the number of elective offices, changing electoral rules, and separating local and regional from national elections. I return below to the implications of this broadening of the concept.

III. CONSENSUS AND LEGITIMACY

Discussions of consensus commonly arise in the context of conflicts over legitimacy, and efforts to clarify what makes authority legitimate in the first place. Whatever the definition, legitimacy clearly involves common values and symbols (the national flag, for example, along with agreement that those who use these symbols, act in their name, and exercise power are in some way entitled to do so. In his classic work on the sociology of authority, Max Weber distinguished power from authority, while carefully delineating among kinds of authority: traditional, charismatic, legal rational. The important point to derive from Weber has less to do with types, and fitting specific cases into the categories provided by his typology of authority, than with understanding how authority (of whatever kind) is claimed, recognized and granted, and how any particular system arranges for the succession of leadership from one (legitimate) holder of authority to another. In all cases, legitimacy involves those who rule making a claim on the obedience and resources of others. Those who are ruled (be they subjects or citizens in the modern sense) recognize that claim because they conclude that the wielder of authority is entitled (by birth, divine grace or special aura, or because they got office by following the legally established rules) to make the claim. Such entitlement, of course, involved more than formal legality: Latin American history is full of dictatorships whose rule was enshrined in constitutions, but no more legitimate for that fact. That citizens or members of a society, along with mobilized and powerful groups and institutions, agree that those in power have the authority to rule, simplifies politics and makes it predictable. Not every action need be backed up with force, as would be the case for example, in a military occupation..

In addition to according rulers the right to rule and to expect obedience, in a democratic state legitimacy has to do with the procedure by which that right is obtained. Democratic legitimacy, and by extension the character of democratic consensus, requires that political leaders attain power and authority by recognized and sanctioned methods, in mutually

acceptable arenas using agreed upon resources such as votes in an election. Legitimacy is therefore both about beliefs and about procedures producing outcomes that all agree to recognize even if one's own side loses. That was in essence what the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* was about – agreeing to recognize the winner of elections regardless of who it was, and to accord that person legitimacy. Although this agreement was reached among party leaders, and in this sense had no force of law, it clearly provided the underpinnings that made possible the Constitution of 1961.

It is important to be clear that in the terms employed here, the government of President Hugo Chávez Frias, like preceding governments during the 1958-98 period is a legitimate government. It is a constitutional government, whose claim to authority rests on the result of elections (recognized and sanctioned arenas and resources) whose results were accepted by opponents. All major participants in the Venezuelan political system recognize the right of those elected in this way to rule. President Chávez is unique in that he has been the constitutional president of Venezuela under two different Constitutions: Constitution of 1961 and the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999. President Chávez is legitimate in the constitutional sense but by 2001 it became evident that significant sectors in the opposition no longer accepted this legitimacy. Although some of these groups focus on public opposition and pursue change through means sanctioned in the 1999 Constitution (such as constitutional amendments or recall votes) others contemplate (and mobilize for) non institutional means of replacing this government and the entire “Bolivarian” political system. Their actions against the government go well beyond the bounds of opposition *within* the system because they see the government as betraying its own norms. This tortuous argument underlies the short lived coup of April 2002, much as it underlay the two attempted coups of 1992, in which then Commandante Hugo Chávez was deeply involved.

IV. DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS IN 1972: THE RULES OF THE GAME¹

Elsewhere I have argued that the consensus that characterized the democratic system put in place (with great difficulty) after 1958 was more about procedures than about substance. To be sure, as some scholars have argued (Arroyo 1988; Crisp 2000; Karl 1987; Rey 1989; Urbaneja 1992), an overarching agreement reached among major party actors and between them and key sectors including business, the military, and the church, set the context for procedural consensus. What did this overall framework provide for? Security of property, no revolution, limiting strikes and wage demands, no threat to Catholic education. With that framework in place, democratic consensus was constructed in a pattern in which political actors

acted in accord with four tacit rules: Freedom for Leaders, the Fragility of Politics, Agreement to Disagree, Concentration of Politics in a limited range of public spaces and organizations (Levine 1973:231-43).

Rule 1 - Freedom for Leaders

The political system put in place after 1958 reinforced the power of political party leaders, a power that was already very great. The power of party leaders was strong because the evolution of parties, and their hierarchical and layered structure, made leadership relatively autonomous from 'sectors' and party-controlled organizations. Party leaders were able to advance general political goals and needs (the good of the party) over specific sectoral demands, for example for wages, benefits, or particular policies. The fact that parties incorporated a wide range of sectors made it easier for leaders to resist pressure from any single component group. Parties were the privileged vehicles for political competition and prevailing electoral rules (and related legislation on political parties) underscored leadership power by providing for closed party lists under proportional representation rules. Leadership control over nominations and placing of candidates on lists was decisive.

Rule 2 - The Fragility of Politics

In the years immediately following 1958, political leaders in Venezuela behaved as if political institutions might collapse at any moment under the pressure of unrestrained conflict or mobilization, and that therefore constant care and attention were required. Concern over possible fragility spurs efforts to build coalitions, mute the expression of partisan hostility, avoid conflict and seek agreement where possible. This stance requires setting explosive issues aside and shelving radical change. All these traits characterize the consensus in place in 1972.

The fears that drove impelled post 1958 leaders to compromise had their origin in memories of the *trienio*, which in the view of key party leaders, failed because conflict got out of hand. Conflict got out of hand because, trusting in their absolute majorities, AD's leaders ignored the need for compromise, promoted polarization, and spurred very intense opposition that ultimately overthrew them. Clearly, an alternative lesson could have been drawn from the *trienio*: one that would have emphasized the need for even greater consolidation of power. This is the kind of lesson some observers see as moving the government of Hugo Chávez Frias, which, relying on its initial majorities, has eschewed compromise and welcomed polarization only to be met by declining popularity and rising, intense opposition. Parallels to the *trienio* are obvious.

Rule 3 - The Agreement to Disagree

After 1958, many of the philosophical and ideological differences that sparked extended conflict during the *trienio* came to be seen as basic realities which could and should not be changed. Many such differences were simply ignored, set aside, in order to allow discussion and negotiations to proceed on commonly accepted grounds. The agreement to disagree was both general and specific. In general terms, conflict and dissent came to be accepted as normal and inevitable: not something to be eliminated, in the long run, by the “will of the people”. All or nothing positions were, with rare exceptions, ruled out. In specific terms, issues were dealt with on a case by case basis, with a working injunction to seek coalitions. The right of opponents to seek and assume power was accepted, within specified channels of power.²

Rule 4 - Concentration

One of the most important rules of Venezuelan politics after 1958 was the monopolization of political action by political parties. The rule might be stated this way: political actions should be restricted to a limited range of organizations and forms of action. The concentration of political action in party and official channels offers a clear alternative to a Praetorian system, where all groups and sectors (including but not limited to the military) intervene in politics because the identity and autonomy of political institutions are insufficiently developed.

The rule of concentration, which in practical terms meant monopolization of political action by political parties and a professional class of politicians, made implementation of the other three rules possible. With concentration of politics in a limited range of acceptable resources, organizations, and public spaces (elections, votes, parties) political interaction became regular and predictable. Agreements could be struck among leaders with confidence that they would be respected and implemented. Electoral rules also reinforced concentration, for example by restricting elections to once every five years, with one ballot cast for President and one for everything else, and magnifying the power of party organization through the implementation of closed list voting.

The effort to concentrate politics was not uncontroversial. There was bitter debate, eventually leading to guerrilla war, between the government of Rómulo Betancourt and the Left, whose insistence that “the streets belong to the people” was met with a demand for permits. The debate is open again in 2002, in more than one way. The political logic of the Bolivarian Republic, as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, rejects concentration of politic (and with it, representation as the final say) in favor

of a range of citizen assemblies, referenda, and provisions for initiative and recall. The Constitution also removed restrictions on political activity by the military. The round of mobilization and counter mobilization that began by mid-2001 shows evidence of deconcentration. If the earlier rule was intended to avoid Praetorian politics, the operative rules that appear to characterize politics in 2002 open the field to a very broad range of groups, resources, and arenas: ad hoc citizen groups, continuous marches and demonstrations, occupations of buildings, military factions, media, military and so forth.³

The rules of the game that describe the democratic consensus of 1972 constitute a method of action, put into effect by political leaders as a way of making politics predictable, ensuring peace, and guaranteeing the survival of institutions. Political leaders developed these rules as a form of practice, but the rules themselves, as well as the political system built around them, only remain viable only as long as key organizations continue to command loyalties. It is the history of strong political parties that made the system work: as political parties decayed, the “rules of the game” gradually lost their power to organize and legitimate behavior.

Sheer inertia, vested interests, and established points of control kept the system running, but the long term erosion of parties and related institutions made them fragile and exceptionally vulnerable to shocks such as the ones provided by the *Caracazo* of February 1989 and the two attempted coups of 1992. In retrospect, what seems like a sudden collapse of parties is more the product of fragility and a long erosion.

V. THE CONSENSUS OF 1972 IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The attempt to divide a historical process into meaningful periods of arbitrary elements, and any selection of starting and end points requires justification. The value of the effort lies in the extent to which it helps us understand the sequence of events, and make sense out of their evolution: to use a contemporary terminology, to illuminate their path dependence. It is evident that the choice of 1972 and 2002 as points for comparison is not neutral. In modern Venezuelan history, the thirty years between 1972 and 2002 are part of a longer sequence of transformations that give meaning to what happened in this period. The year 1972, the starting point for this analysis, came just before the dramatic consolidation of democratic politics in Venezuela around competition monopolized by two ‘catch all’ parties whose structure and orientation worked against polarization. The year 2002, the end point for this analysis, comes after a period of dramatic political dealignment, amid intense polarization and a profusion of new citizen groups and political parties.

The elections of 1968 marked a key moment in the consolidation of democratic consensus, the first time in modern history that the government changed hands through elections, with the opposition taking office. The next elections were also of great significance. After a decade of steady decline (aided by their important party divisions) in 1973 both AD and its Presidential candidate, Carlos Andrés Pérez rebounded with sweeping across the board victories. This ushered in fifteen years of overwhelming joint electoral domination at all levels by AD and COPEI, with the latter winning the Presidency a second time in 1978. This joint electoral control, and the organizational system it reflected and reinforced, is often referred to as *puntofijista* but there is nothing in the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* that required or encouraged two party competition, much less competition between the two parties that came to monopolize the political scene; *Acción Democrática* and *Copei*. Political parties were the key to the political operation of the system created then, but their subsequent evolution into massive, all controlling bureaucracies, much less an enduring duopoly, was never inevitable.

Table 1 – The Democratic History of Venezuela: Key Periods

Period	Presidents	Key events/achievements
1945 – 1948	Rómulo Betancourt Rómulo Gallegos	Trienio, major reforms, mass suffrage overthrow in 1948
1958 – 1973	Rómulo Betancourt Raúl Leoni Rafael Caldera	Installation of Democracy Defeat of coups and guerrillas Constitution of 1961 Successive Transfers of power by election
1973 – 1989	Carlos Andrés Pérez Luis Herrera Campins Jaime Lusinchi	Two party domination, beginning institutional reforms, Successive Transfers of power by election
1989 – 1998	Carlos Andrés Pérez Ramon Velásquez Rafael Caldera	Caracazo (February 1989 rioting in Caracas) attempted coups of 1992, impeachment of Pérez, decay of parties
1999 – present	Hugo Chávez Frías	New Constitution, destruction of parties, rise of Chávez, polarization, New constitution, institutional change, new electoral rules, polarization, rise of opposition, Events of April 2002

To understand the sense in which 1972 ushers in a period of democratic consolidation, it may help to situate this year within a broader periodization of modern democratic history in Venezuela. Table 1 summarizes the periods.

The historiography of these years is ample, and only a very brief summary is necessary here. For present purposes, the 1945-48 *trienio* is

significant for four related reasons: the introduction of universal suffrage, the initiation of a major program of economic, social, and political reforms, extreme political polarization, and the lessons drawn by political leaders from their overthrow. Returning to power after 1958, these same leaders pursued a cautious track, focusing less on programs than on building and consolidating common procedures and legitimate institutions, and surviving in the face of real peril: numerous attempted military coups were defeated, as was an extended guerrilla insurrection. Three successive national elections were held, and power was transferred, for the first time, to an opposition party. There was slow but undeniable progress in the promotion of economic growth and welfare, including health and education benefits. The society continued its rapid urbanization. The next fifteen years witnessed the dramatic consolidation of a two party system, the massive surge of petroleum prices and income after 1973, and an equally dramatic economic decay beginning in the early 1980s. The effects of this decay were masked for a while, but became fully visible in 1989, with the economic policies of the new Pérez regime, and the violent public reaction.

The decade beginning in 1989 is without a doubt one of the most dramatic and conflict filled of modern Venezuelan history: massive urban rioting, two attempted coups, and the impeachment and removal from office of a sitting president, the election of an explicitly non party President in 1993, and the creation of a new political movement (around Hugo Chávez Frías) that rejected the entire legacy of the past forty years. Economic and political pressures accentuated the effects of a long term weakening of political parties: organizations decayed and support vanished. After the urban explosion of February 27, 1989, protest and urban violence became the daily bread of urban life (Hernández 2002; Lopez Maya 2002, PROVEA). The political parties were not the only institutions to be discredited; legislatures and above all, the judicial and penal systems lost all credibility with the public.

For many, the election of Hugo Chavez Frias in 1998, and the subsequent “refounding of the Republic” with a new Constitution and new institutions in 1999, brought hopes for the reconstruction of democratic politics on broader, more inclusive, more authentic, and less corrupt bases (Gott 2000). As candidate and later as President, Chávez has insisted that his “Bolivarian” revolution looks to a different kind of democratic consensus, not founded on elite agreement and representative institutions, but rather on revolutionary transformation and close, regular participation at all levels by the people. The Constitution itself shies away from anything that smacks of “representation” or representative government. Articles 6 and 70 are suggestive:⁴

“El gobierno de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela y de las entidades politicas que la componen es y será siempre democrático, participativo, electivo, descentralizado, alternativo, responsable, pluralista y de mandatos revocables. (Art 6).

“Son medios de participación y protagonismo del pueblo en ejercicio de su soberanía, en lo político: la elección de cargos públicos, el referendo, la consulta popular, la revocatoria del mandato, la iniciativa legislativa, consitucional y constituyente, el cabildo abierto y la asamblea de ciudadanos y ciudadanos cuyas decisiones seran de caracter vinculante, entre otros, y en lo social y económico: las instancias de atención ciudadano, la autogestión, la cogestión, las coooperativas en todas sus formas incluyendo las de carácter financiero, las cajas de ahorro, la empresa comunitaria y demás formas asociativas guiadas por los valores de mutual cooperación y solidaridad.

La ley establecerá las condiciones para el efectivo funcionamiento de los medios de participación previstos en este artículo.” (Art 70)

Apart from referenda, which have had extremely limited use,⁵ there has been little or no creation of institutions to implement these new forms of participation. Instead, the political logic of the Bolivarian Revolution has been one that rests on mobilization and legitimates itself with reference to electoral majorities, to the President’s regular repeated contact with the people, and to the regime’s (and the President’s) capacity to put people into the street. History suggests the risks of such an approach: overwhelming majorities commonly fade after a while, particularly under economic stress. This has been the case in Venezuela, where the opposition began to recover by mid-2001, and started to challenge the government on its own ground: the capacity to mobilize masses and put people into the streets. Explicitly rejecting consensus as equivalent to compromising the Revolution, President Chávez has gradually broken with many early allies, thus losing elements of his coalition and putting his once enormous legislative majority in danger.

A contributing factor to the democratic consensus of 1972 was the degree to which politics no longer appeared to be a zero sum game, a contest that one side could only win to the extent that the other loses. The defeat of the guerrilla movement and the advent of massive new revenues from petroleum helped shift the emphasis in Venezuelan politics from all or nothing conflict to one of broader incorporation and sharing. Others could now win by playing according to the new rules; the political game no longer worked solely to AD’s advantage. Only at this stage could the idea of compromise merge and gain acceptance. After all, why compromise with a system which regularly and routinely excludes one’s interests? Even the most casual glance at the political rhetoric of 2002 reveals that despite

President Chávez evident decline in the polls, many in the opposition are skeptical that they can win playing according to Bolivarian rules.

If we take the rhythm of confrontational and violent protests as a crude but useful indicator of legitimacy (not to mention consensus) it is clear that the legitimacy of President Chávez as well as of the entire Bolivarian Revolution is not accepted by key elements of the opposition. The data collected by López Maya clearly indicates that although the volume of protest indeed drops more or less in half in the five years following 1994 (the years of Rafael Caldera's second Presidency), the volume of protest rose sharply in 1998, and has remained on an upward track ever since. (López Maya 2002, Table 1). Among the kinds of action, confrontational protests showed the strongest increase in 1999. López Maya's figures do not encompass the events of 2001 and 2002, when an officially sponsored, violent effort to take over the Central University was rebuffed by faculty and students and the government was defeated in its effort to take over the trade union movement. These defeats energized the opposition, and beginning in late 2001, protests entered a regular rhythm of massive marches and counter marches, coming to a head in the disaster of April 11, 2002. After a brief respite while all sides stepped back from the brink, protests, marches and counter marches began again – this time all over the country.

VI. THE CONTRAST OF 1972 AND 2002

The democratic consensus of 1972 was never without its critics, although criticism mounted in intensity and visibility, as the depth and extent of institutional and political decay began to become apparent. With considerable justification, critics such as Naím and Piñango or Urbaneja pointed out that political arrangements and institutions built on a desire to avoid conflict and polarization had become frozen in place, and lost much of their logic with the consolidation of the system. By keeping conflicts from being recognized and expressed, in the long run the prevailing system made them all the more extreme when they finally did break onto the public scene. The established 'rules of the game' now unduly shielded leaders, and stifled political expression and organization. Further, a political system hinged on protecting leaders and maintaining all controlling organizations lost viability in a context where information was abundant, citizens were literate and mostly in a media-rich urban environment.. Denying the reality of conflict and perpetuating an "illusion of harmony could in fact be counter productive, making it difficult to recognize and address potentially important issues. Arroyo (1988), Rey (1989, 1991) and Coppedge (1994) agree and underscore the point that as

the system lost its reason for being, political survival and hanging on to the trappings and benefits of power replaced ideological debate and commitment to the implementation of policy. Coppedge argues that the system was ossified, frozen in place and that the rules of the game and the parties that organized them had long since lost organizational vitality and reason for being. This, combined with their continued group on institutions, isolated parties and their leaders from public scrutiny and control. Access was very limited. The net result was government that was isolated, corrupt, inefficient, unaccountable, and increasingly illegitimate in the eyes of the public.

Groups on the Left, which were marginalized by the post-1958 consensus, maintained a consistent critique according to which the ‘democratic’ consensus was not very democratic at all. Rather, it rested on repression, on an illegitimate limiting of the political agenda to remove basic issues, and on undemocratic methods of corruption and cooptation. Such criticisms were echoed in slightly different terms by scholars like Terry Karl (1987), who stressed that the “democratic consensus’ was one arrived at by undemocratic means. Relying on pacts and negotiations among elites, she argued, unduly shielded leaders from the public, encouraged a culture of corruption, and made accountability difficult if not completely impossible.

Much of this criticism has been vindicated by the deterioration of consensus of 1972, the successful challenge mounted by President Chavez, and his ultimate replacement of the old system with the political arrangements and operative rules of the Bolivarian Republic. The old rules have been swept from the scene, and the organizational structures and loyalties that gave them life and made them are simply no longer there. AD and COPEI may survive as organizations, but a long process of decay has gutted them completely. As organizations they are simply unable to do the things they did thirty years earlier: where they survive they are more like burned out shells than living groups that command loyalties and can set people in motion, control behaviors. The more important point, is that the society in which such parties made sense: a society in rapid transformation out of agrarian status, no longer exists. Venezuela is now urbanized, literate, media soaked – no place for all controlling, all encompassing parties.

I noted earlier the broad rejection of the logic of representation and the related insistence on direct citizen participation that is enshrined in the Constitution of 1999. Although it is probably too early for definitive identification of the political logic and rules of the game of the Bolivarian Republic, it is evident that whatever they may be, it is clear that the

democratic consensus of 1972 no longer governs politics. Of the four “rules of the game” that I identified as central to that consensus, only one (Freedom for Leaders) remains valid, and even that is much weaker than in the past. The experience of the impeachment and removal from office of President Carlos Andres Perez broke a long standing taboo of leadership impunity. Although President Chavez has indeed operated with considerable freedom, he now faces a wave of lawsuits that may prosper as his majority in Congress shrinks. The rule according to which politics is fragile and that therefore conflict and polarization must be avoided has clearly lost its power to control behavior. I have already noted the parallel between the politics of the *trienio* and the politics of the Bolivarian Republic: relying on large majorities, the President has welcomed polarization with confidence that he would prevail. Following the events of April 11, 2002, that confidence is at the very least less secure. The rule that enjoins an agreement to disagree has been seriously eroded. Although all parties continue to work within the National Assembly and by and large to accept the decisions of the courts, common effort within other arenas, such as trade unions, has been undermined. The final rule, the rule of concentration, according to which politics can and should be concentrated in a limited range of organizations and resources has utterly disappeared. The proliferation of citizen groups and new political parties, along with the removal of restrictions on political involvement by the military, has opened political space to a broad array of new forces. Table 2 below summarizes the situation.

Table 2 – Consenso Democratico Venezolano en dos tiempos

Reglas del Juego	1972	2002
Freedom for Leaders	Yes	Weakened
Fragility of Politics	Yes	No
Agreement to Disagree	Yes	No
Concentration	Yes	No
Supporting elements		
Strong parties	Organizational loyalties	
Coalitions	Neutral spaces	
Abundant Resources	International Context	

Although it is instructive to compare the situation in 2002 with that of 1972, more than a simple point by point comparison of the old rules with the present situation is required if we are to grasp the logic and implicit rules now being put in place. It is clear that the old system has not survived.

Can new operating “rules of the game be identified? If so, what supporting elements are in place, or perhaps in creation, that may help them work? I have already noted the rejection of representation, the insistence on direct citizen access, and the underlying logic of mobilization that seems to characterize the politics of 2002. Beyond these points, four significant factors must be addressed: the continued importance of constitutionalism, the continued importance of an appeal to legitimacy based on elections, the presence of the military as active presence on the political scene., and the international context and its effects on national politics.

Throughout the extended political crisis of the 1990s, commitment to the Constitution and to constitutional methods remained a powerful element in political discourse. Despite predictions of institutional breakdown, President Carlos Andres Perez was impeached and removed from office and an interim successor chosen all in accord with established procedure. The elections of 1993 were held as scheduled and the results respected. Although repeated efforts at reform of the 1961 Constitution died in Congress, victims of the prevailing political impasse, the goal of political reform through constitutional change did not. The Chávez campaign argued for creating a new Constitution through the means of a constituent Assembly, a much more far reaching method than one focused on reform of the existing Constitution. On assuming office, President Chávez made clear his intention to call a referendum on the issues.⁶ The referendum was held, the constituent Assembly met, and a new Constitution was drafted and approved in due course by a referendum.

The Constitution of 1999 remains controversial in key points, including the expanded power of the Presidency, the recentralization of institutions, and provisions for control of the military. That its legitimacy is questioned was made apparent by the attempt of the “Transitional Government” of Pedro Carmona to abolish it in April 2002. The restoration of President Chavez to office and power restored the Bolivarian Constitution and with it, at least for the moment, of constitutionalism (including the possibilities of constitutional amendment) as a framework for political debate. Faith in elections and a commitment to respect the results of elections also remain important, although clearly weakened elements of the democratic consensus of 2002. The commitment is weakened not only by the failure of the effort to hold important “mega elections” of 2000 (the first such failure in the modern democratic history of the country) but also by the evident belief among sectors of the opposition that despite his declining levels of support, President Chávez would be likely to win elections, given divisions within the opposition. Unwilling to play by rules of a game they think they cannot win, these

sectors push for confrontation in the hopes of bringing military intervention to control disorder.⁷

This raises the question of the newly prominent place of the military. One of the signal achievements of the democratic consensus of 1972 had been to consolidate civilian control over the military. As part of this control, there were strict prohibitions on military involvement in politics. These were removed in the 1999 Constitution, which puts control over the military in the hands of the President, and removes the prohibition on political activity. Instead of being marginalized from politics, the military is now to be an active partner in the making and implementing of policy. President Chávez' reliance on military and ex-military figures to fill Cabinet and sub cabinet position, as well as appointed posts of all kinds, has been a prominent feature of his government from the beginning. Manuel Caballero has stated that the politics of the twentieth century of Venezuela can be understood as a continuing struggle for supremacy between civilians (represented in the political parties) and the military. Strengthened, professionalized and consolidated under the rule of Juan Vicente Gómez, the military utterly dominated national political life for the first fifty eight years of the past century, with the brief exception of the *trienio*. Civilian control was the norm for the next four decades, with the pendulum swinging back to the center with the changes put in place under the Constitution of 1999.

The renewed presence of the military as elements in government and politics adds an unknown element to the political equation. Military figures themselves appear in public to support or denounce the government. Major political actors – government, political parties, and the many components of 'civil society' – look to the military as potential supporters or coalition partners. Latin American history in general, and Venezuelan history in particular, underscore the perils of such alliances. Civilian groups have often made bargains with elements in the military as a means of getting into or holding onto power, betting that their military partners could be controlled, only to be faced with extended military rule. The examples of Venezuela after 1945 and Chile after 1973 come all too readily to mind.

The international context is very different in 2002 from thirty years earlier. Thirty years earlier, the democratic consensus of Venezuela was strongly supported by important international actors, most notably the United States. Support from the United States played a key role in the consolidation of the political system after 1958 which saw Venezuela as a North American policy makers saw Venezuela as a key ally and an island of democratic stability within Latin America, and also as a clear counter to Cuban influence in the Caribbean basin. This is no longer the case. The

foreign policy of the Bolivarian Republic has moved Venezuela from being a consistent ally of the United States, to being its most consistent opponent (along with Cuba) among Latin American states. The international context of 2002 has important elements that are clearly hostile to the Chavez regime and to the Bolivarian Revolution in general. President Chávez' open ties with the guerrilla movement in Colombia, his shielding of the disgraced Peruvian intelligence chief, Vladimir Montesinos, his last ditch support for ex Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, and of course his close ties with Fidel Castro has brought hostility from the United States, as well as cool relations with other Latin American states. The attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, and the resulting US war on terrorism, further heightened tensions between the US and Venezuela. Other international actors have had a more nuanced effect. Calling on the terms of the Democratic Charter (*Carta Democrática*) other Latin American states actively supported the restoration of President Chávez to office after his brief ouster in April, 2002. Following those events, the Organization of American States has attempted to promote dialogue between government and opposition.

VII. CONCLUSION

A common interpretation of the Venezuelan politics holds that the democratic consensus of 1972 was made possible, in the final analysis, by income from petroleum. In this view, the abundant resources available to political leaders (resources that increased geometrically with the post 1973 surge of oil revenues) underwrote negotiation and compromise and made possible a system of patronage and payoffs that kept most players loyal to the system. As economic difficulties mounted, and available resources declined, the system fell of its own weight. Without falling into mono factor explanations or economic determinism, it is important to acknowledge, at the very least, that the abundance of resources allowed Venezuela's leaders to avoid distributional dilemmas common to other Latin American countries. Extended scarcity and economic decline can undermine even the strongest of democracies. How do economic factors affect the potential viability of democratic consensus in 2002? Despite relatively high petroleum prices, the first three years of the Bolivarian Republic have clearly been marked by extended economic decline: high unemployment, disinvestments and growing inflation. The continuation of bad economic news has clearly been associated with declining support for the government and growing polarization.

Consensus of any kind is not a bargain that can simply be made and then relied upon to work. Consensus rests on a delicate set of

understandings and arrangements that require care and attention. Like complex machinery, it must be maintained if it is function properly. But of course, consensus in politics is anything but mechanical: it is made by flesh and blood human beings, people with emotions (such as loyalty or anger) and people with memories that give them guidance about how to act. Who the actors are, how they are formed and where they come from is of critical importance. A review of the key actors in play during the astonishing events of April, 2002, in which a government was brought down and restored (with a heavy toll of lives lost in the space of only a few days) reveals almost a complete absence of professional politicians and political parties. The most visible key players were trade union leaders, businessmen, church leaders, military officers, “leaders of civil society”. The absence of professional politicians goes a long way to explaining the rush to action, the unwillingness (on all sides) to negotiate, to wait for elections.

Since the events of April, various efforts to broker dialogue and to mediate between government and opposition (for example, by the Carter Center or the Organization of American States) have had little success. This is not surprising. For dialogue to be productive and possible, all sides must be open to the very notion of dialogue, and there must be reasonable coherence within each party. That is, representatives of any given position must be able to speak for their constituency with reasonable confidence that agreements reached can be implemented. These conditions were important supporting elements of the democratic consensus of 1972. They are no longer present and prospects for their recreation appear to be limited at best.

Venezuela has appeared to be on the cusp of major political and institutional transformations since the early 1990s,, but the potential for creating and consolidating a new kind of politics has been realized only in part. New political parties have been formed and new citizen movements abound, but there is little consensus on how to work these new forces into stable and consistent political arrangements. The democratic consensus of 1972 has disappeared; the old rules are no longer valid, and the supporting elements that made them effective no longer exist. The kind of consensus envisioned in the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 has not yet found operative expression in a set of stable rules and procedures that command universal loyalty, or at the very least, acquiescence. This makes prospects for long term consolidation of the political system very uncertain.

Notes

- 1 This section draws freely on my earlier work, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela* (1973).
- 2 In an interview in *The New York Times*, Teodoro Petkoff summarized this rule as follows: "The country became civilized throughout much of those years. Back then, we understood debate, and we knew that not agreeing on something did not have to mean falling into threats." *The New York Times*, September 22, 2002 (Week in Review Section, p. 3).
- 3 Cf. the 1991 Annual Report of PROVEA, a major human rights group, which states: "In contrast to earlier years, and basically during and after the National Protests of February 1989 it was possible to confirm that *the social spectrum participating in protests is widening. Now participation in organized protests has opened fields of action for new groups: along with students and workers one finds a range of professional associations and social groups: doctors, nurses, peasants, Indians, firemen, police, cultural workers, housewives, and neighborhood groups actively joining in movements in defense of basic rights* (italics in original) (PROVEA, 114-15).
- 4 Cited in Kornblith (2002).
- 5 In the referendum on the Constitution, and the December 2000 referendum on renewing the leadership of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela, in which the officially sponsored slate of candidates was defeated. For a thorough discussion of the conditions of possible referenda, and related mechanisms of popular consultation, see Kornblith (2002). The very logic of the referendum was more one of acclamation than competition; as the government's popularity, not surprisingly its enthusiasm for referendums also faded.
- 6 On his first day in office, President Chavez stated that "the Constitution, and with it the ill-fated political system to which it gave birth 40 years ago, has to die! It is going to die, gentlemen! Accept it.!" (Quoted in the *New York Times*, 3 E February 1999).
- 7 An editorial in *Tal Cual*, which is normally anti-Chavez, makes this point very clearly.

"Como era de esperarse, algunos así llamados "analistas políticos" embistieron ayer contra el criterio subyacente en el editorial, que recordaba episodios de hace más de medio siglo. Nos interesa rescatar uno de los argumentos en contra: estaríamos desestimulando la lucha contra Chávez. Pues es todo lo contrario. Recordar la historia de los fracasos ayuda a no tropezar dos veces con la misma piedra. Desde luego que no se trata de extrapolar los hechos de 1950, para meterlos forzadamente dentro del contexto actual. Son situaciones completamente diferentes. Sobre lo que pretendemos llamar la atención es acerca de los métodos de lucha y la necesidad de ajustarlos a las condiciones que se viven, sin confundir los deseos propios con la realidad. Dicho de otro modo, sin creer en pajaritos preñados.

Por supuesto, las diferencias entre las dos épocas son más que obvias. Comenzando por el "detalle" de que la de Pérez Jiménez era una dictadura militar frente a la cual no había prácticamente ninguna alternativa que no fuera la insurreccional, tanto civil como militar. El de Chávez es un gobierno insoportable, ciertamente, pero sostener que se trata de una dictadura militar que no deja opciones constituye un diagnóstico que puede conducir a decisiones equivocadas y a fracasos. Por eso las formas de lucha cuentan tanto. Y ningún sector extremista y minoritario puede imponer sus propios desvaríos como línea de conducta a todo el movimiento popular. ("El pueblo en la calle el 23 de enero de 1958" (*Tal Cual*, 19 septiembre, 2002).

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