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Political Trust and Polarization in the Post-Chavista Venezuela

Damarys Canache
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What happens when a charismatic and popular president who has dominated the political landscape in a country for many years dies? How do citizens react to this type of political shock? Questions such as these began to mount as Venezuelans and observers elsewhere learned that President Hugo Chávez, the popular politician who had just been reelected for his third term, passed away in March 2013. The absence of this powerful and charismatic leader immediately sparked considerable conjecture about how Venezuela’s political system would adapt in a post-Chávez era.

Although much of this initial reflection focused on political elites’ reactions and future maneuvers — for instance, on which possible fissures and/or accommodations within the chavista ruling elite would emerge, or on how the dynamic of relations between the chavistas and the opposition forces would go forward — systematic analysis of public opinion in the post-Chávez era is also essential. Taking advantage of the AmericasBarometer data series on Venezuelans’ public opinion, this paper traces the dynamics of public support for the Venezuelan political system, with particular attention directed to the nature and structure of opinion during the Chávez presidency, and possible changes in opinion following the president’s death.

Social scientists debate on how to characterize the political system in Venezuela. Some scholars believe that Venezuela is a democracy defined by the participatory rather than by the representative aspects of democracy (Elner and Hellinger 2003; Gott 2000; Pastor and Martinez Dalmau 2001; Wilper 2011), others believe that Venezuela’s system has developed strong authoritarian tendencies, and it is at minimum best characterized by a combination of democratic and autocratic elements (McCoy and Myer 2004; Levitsky and Way 2002; López Maya 2011), while others see it as a full-autocratic regime (Brewer-Carias 2010; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2007; Norden 2003). Regardless of which position one may take in appraising the nature of the current political system, any observation of the Venezuelan political reality since 1998 must conclude that while in power Hugo Chávez made meaningful headways in shifting the balance of power among competing elites, transforming the institutional structure of the Venezuelan political system. Capitalizing on the widespread call for political change that existed in Venezuela, Chávez and his movement, hereafter Chavismo, initiated a process of political change that is still

2 Signs of political fragility began to emerge as the tight social and political control of the traditional parties AD and COPEI was weakening amid a protracted economic and social crisis of vast dimensions (Canache 2002; McCoy and Myers 2004).
ensuing as President Maduro and his party work to implement the model of 21st Century Socialism.

This paper seeks to understand how the advancement of Chavez’s political project in Venezuela has affected public opinion, and particularly the psychological link between Venezuelan citizens and the institutions of national government. My analysis starts with a simple premise: Hugo Chávez was a transformative figure in Venezuelan politics. His entrance and his exit from politics significantly influenced many areas of public opinion in Venezuela, including political trust. By political trust I mean the judgment of trust that links citizens to the fundamental institutions of the national government — the executive branch, the legislative branch and the judicial branch — that are intended to represent them (Bianco, 1994).

These national institutions embody the notions of divided government and checks and balances crucial to the conception of representative liberal democracy. Political developments in Venezuela demonstrate that Hugo Chávez and his political movement industriously worked to weaken the principles and institutions of liberal democracy (e.g., Corrales 2013; Canache 2012; Levitsky and Way 2002; López Maya 2012; Weyland 2009), while at the same time creating an alternate political model. Consequently, examination of Venezuelans’ trust toward these institutions should shed light on the nature of political support there. Are Venezuelans more trustful or more skeptical than other Latin American citizens when they evaluate the institutions of the national government? Was the nature of political trust different under Chávez’s rule than it is now under Maduro’s rule? And what about the new institutions Chavismo has introduced in Venezuela? Do people trust these new structures? This paper seeks to answer such questions.

I build my study on a simple assumption, which is that when Venezuelan citizens form judgments about the institutional structure of the national government, they do so driven primarily by their attitudes toward the executive branch, and specifically the president. The existence of linkages across institutional structures has been documented elsewhere (Berstein 2001; Caldeira 1986; Kimball and Patterson 1997; Montinola 2011; Rahn and Rudolph 2005; Uslaner 2001). Rahn and Rudolph (2002) show that when evaluating institutions individuals use information about institutions with which they are most familiar to infer about those institutions they know little; thus, individual use proxies to form their judgments of political trust. Drawing on and extrapolating from objective information about the performance of these institutions, and particularly about the presidency, is one of the information-processing strategies individuals use when making political choices. Other political shortcuts such as drawing guidance from ideological orientations and partisan preferences also are helpful in the decision making process (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1996; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Jacoby 1991; Zechmeister 2006). Given the highly polarizing nature of politics in Venezuela in recent years, I anticipate that

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3 From 1998-2006, Chávez and his allies promoted the idea of participatory democracy as an alternative and better option of liberal democracy. After his re-election in 2006, President Chávez began to articulate the model of 21st Century Socialism (López Maya 2011).
reliance on views of the government, and on ideology and partisanship, occurs in most areas of public opinion, including those regarding how citizens see fundamental institutions of the political system.

Accordingly, I suspect that due to the strength and qualities of Chávez’s leadership, Venezuelans’ judgments of trust toward various government institutions are strongly interconnected. In Venezuela, many trusted these institutions because of their affinity for Chávez, and many others distrusted these institutions because of their disapproval of Chávez. If my intuition is correct, we should observe that during Chávez’s rule these institutional trust attitudes were highly interconnected. After Chávez’s death, with Chávez removed as a galvanizing force in public opinion, it follows that we may less coherence in public opinion. And what is such a decline in coherence is not observed? Evidence that there is no change in how Venezuelans trust the institutions of government would suggest that the influence of Chavismo on Venezuelan public opinion transcends the movement’s foundational leader. Additionally, systematic evidence that Venezuelan citizens based their judgments of trust in institutions on their ideological and partisan position would be consistent with the notion that politics in Venezuela is highly polarized.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on trust, and especially institutional trust, with special focus on the sources of these views. The next section explains the measure of political trust employed in subsequent empirical tests. Next, the analysis begins with a description of political trust in Venezuela post-Chávez. To provide context to help gauge these data, the analysis uses regional and temporal data as means to situate Venezuela relative to other nations in Latin America, and Venezuela in 2014 relative to earlier years. Then the analysis turns to describe and explain the polarized nature of political trust in Venezuela. In the last section, the analysis centers on the alternative power structures existing in Venezuela, the military and the Communal Councils, as the significance of these institutions seems to have increased in the last year. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the findings and implications for Venezuelan politics.

Can Citizens Trust Institutions?

Trust, whether in its social and political facet, has become a central concept in the study of democratic politics, with analysts crediting the existence of trust for positive societal outcomes such as civic participation, good governance, democratic quality, democratic representation, and political legitimacy. Conversely, the absence of trust has been linked to a host of negative societal outcomes (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1988, 1999; Putman 1993; Uslaner 2002; Hetherington 2003; Mainwaring 2006; Tyler 1998; cf. Cleary and Stokes 2006, 2009). More narrowly, political trust — understood as trust in institutions of government — is considered an important source of political legitimacy and political support (Booth and Seligson 2009; Gilley 2009; Norris 1999). Citizens are expected to comply with laws and obey public officials because they recognize,
and agree in principle, that those laws and decisions emerge from trustworthy authorities and institutions.

How best to think about trust and political trust has been the subject of lengthy debate. Broadly speaking, there are three points on which social scientists working with the notions of trust and political trust seem to agree. First, the concept of trust is at its core relational, meaning that trust denotes the existence of an interaction between two parties, the one who trusts and the one who is worthy of trust (the trusted). Second, the presence of trust means that one party has judged another party — an individual, group, or institution — to be trustworthy. And lastly, students of trust remark on the conditional and domain-specific nature of trust. In other words, trust is given to specific individuals (e.g., friends, neighbors, and political officials) or institutions (e.g., a PTA board, a local bank, the Congress) on specific matters (Hardin 2002; Levi and Stoker 2009).

Russell Hardin (1998, 2002), an influential theorist who has commented extensively on trust, argues that the central elements of the notion of general trust cannot be extrapolated to the idea of trust in government. For example, an individual cannot trust the government in the same sense that he can trust a close friend. In Hardin’s words “… A claim to trust government is typically implausible if it is supposed to be analogous to a claim to trust another person…” (2002, 151)

Hardin’s reasoning is grounded in his theory of trust as encapsulated interest. This theory conceives of trust as an interaction based on expectations and incentives of the involved parties, where A trusts B because A believes that it is in the interest of B to reciprocate such trust; simply put, A believes it is in the interest of B to be trustworthy. Thereby, “I trust you because your interest encapsulates mine, which is to say that you have an interest in fulfilling my trust” (2002, 3). For Hardin, trust is both a relational and an inherently cognitive notion.4 In supporting his view of the implausibility of trusting political institutions, Harding argues5 that because trust is a cognitive phenomenon that requires assessments of the commitments of the trusted, the difficulty with “trusting the government” lies in the limited knowledge about the government available to ordinary citizens.

According to Hardin, rather than trust in the sense of the trust that is characteristic of interpersonal relations, trust in government is based on reasons to believe government agents to be trustworthy (p. 151). Hence, the trustworthiness of institutions, or more precisely of the agents of the institutions, is central to the generalization of the notion of trust from individuals to institutions; the knowledge and interpretation of the trustworthiness of the institutions requires that citizens believe that institutions are acting to take into account their interests.

4 Hardin conceives trust as “… a cognitive notion in the same family of such notions as knowledge, belief, and the kind of judgment that can be called assessment…” (2002, 7)

5 On this point, Hardin (2002) notices that the difficulty of trusting the government due to cognitive limitations of the common citizen will hold irrespective of which view is adopted on the source of trust. Views that ground trust on moral commitment, character, or self-interest, all demand cognitive assessments that are largely absent in ordinary citizens.
From the discussion above it follows that citizens trust political institutions when they believe that those institutions are worthy of trust and for this to happen citizens must believe that these institutions are representing their interests (regardless of this being true). How do individuals form judgments about the trustworthiness of political institutions? Because trust, as Hardin argues, is inherently cognitive, I consider possible information-processing strategies that allow individuals to make inferences about the trustworthiness of institutions, and that eventually may support the decision to trust.

First, citizens may form trust judgments based on their experience with and assessment of the performance of political institutions. Realistically, most citizens do not have the resources and capabilities to assess in a precise and well-informed manner the trustworthiness of the institutions (and of the role holders in these institutions); at best citizens can make some inductive expectations based on institutional performance (Hardin 2002, 156).

Second and related to the point above, citizens may use their experience with one institution to generate expectations about the other institutions. In examining support for the courts, Montinola (2009, 286) argues that the observed link in citizens’ evaluations of different government institutions is the result of a specific information-processing strategy; this strategy, she theorizes “…directs individuals to use information on institutions with which they are familiar to make inferences regarding institutions about which they know little.”

Finally, when forming political trust judgments citizens rely on short-cuts. A large body of empirical research on citizens’ competence and capabilities has shown that average citizens do not make fully-informed and rational decisions (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). When making political judgments and choices ordinary citizens are not “fully informed” but rather “partially” informed, and yet they still form opinions and often make sensible decisions. Individuals turn to heuristics, devices that help them to make efficient political choices (Sniderman, Brody and Tectlock 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Mondak 1993). Heuristics are decision-making devices providing individuals with cues about how to see the political world, and how to deal “…efficiently and easily with the information demands of political decision-making and opinion formation” (Jacob 2002, 124). I suggest that among the most prominent cues available to citizens when assessing the trustworthiness of the institutions of government are those political identities that constrain how they view the political world. Ideological orientations (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Jacoby 1991; Zechmeister 2006) and partisan preferences (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1996) constitute the most prominent heuristics available to individuals. Ideological (Left/Right) orientations and partisanship supply individuals unsure about where their interests lie about a policy, candidate or any political decision, with a framework to evaluate and make judgments about those various political objects and outcomes.

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6 On this point see also Mondak et al. 2007; Rahn and Rudolph 2002.

7 This portrait focused first in the American context but it was afterward replicated by research in European nations (Butler and Stokes 1969; Converse and Pierce 1986).
In sum, when we say that citizens trust the institutions of government what we are really saying is that citizens form judgments about the commitment of their government to the task of representation (regardless of whether the institutions are actually acting upon citizens’ interests). Citizens can use various information-processing paths to assess the trustworthiness of their government. In lieu of full and complete information about the workings and actions of these institutions, we propose that several information-processing strategies — i.e., performance-centered induction, and informational shortcuts from experiences with other branches of government, ideological orientations, and partisan leanings — supply individuals with the information they need to judge the trustworthiness of the institutions of government.

The next section reviews the empirical literature on the sources of political support in search of evidence that can be interpreted as lending credence to the paths I suggest guide individuals in forming their judgments of political trust.

**The Sources of Political Trust**

The empirical research on political trust carried out in the United States and other Western advanced democracies has demonstrated that the public’s confidence in key democratic institutions of representative democracy has declined over time (e.g., Citrin 1974; Curtice and Jowell 1997; Dalton 1996, 1999, 2004; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Inglehart 1997; Listhaug and Wiberg 1995; Miller 1974a, 1974b; Norris 1999). The identification of this trend and its extension to contemporary political life led to multiple interpretations of the meaning of the public’s disenchantment for the governability and stability of these democracies. Does the low level of trust in institutions reflect a deeper problem with the democratic process, or instead does it merely signify short-term discontent with incumbent authorities and the performance of government?

To answer these questions, scholars have inquired on the sources of institutional trust. The literature distinguishes two broad theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain macro- and micro-level political trust; one approach conceives trust as exogenous to political institutions while the other as endogenous to institutions themselves. The political culture perspective (e.g., Almond and Verba, 1963; Eckstein 1966; Inglehart 1990, 1997; Inglehart and Abramson 1994; Putnam 1993) falls within the first category because these theories postulate that trust in political institutions originates in the social sphere; trust is the result of long-lasting, deep beliefs about people that are rooted in the socialization process. In this view, political trust is grounded in underlying values and attitudes that facilitate the kind of social and political cooperation fundamental for democratic life. In particular, political trust is best seen as a projection of interpersonal trust. In contrast, institutional theories of political trust situate the sources of trust inside the political sphere; from this perspective, trust in institutions is a rational decision based on the utility that citizens derive from the performance of political institutions (e.g., March 1998; North 1990; Dasgupta 1998; Hetherington 1998, 2006).
The empirical record offers substantial support for institutional theories of political trust.\(^8\) Research using cross-national designs with aggregate-level, individual-level, or a combination of both types of data yields evidence that objective indicators of institutional performance and perceptions of institutional performance are strongly related to average trust at the national level and individuals’ attitudes of trust in these institutions respectively (e.g., Dalton 2004; Cleary and Stokes 2006, 2009; Booth and Seligson 2009; Stokes, Mishler and Rose 2001). Theories posited at the micro-level have a more difficult time making definitive statements about the directionality of the relationship between perceptions of institutional performance and institutional trust. Nonetheless, I believe, as others have argued before, that when citizens observe that their government is unable to solve a serious economic crisis or is regularly involved in corruption scandals, they will become more critical and distrustful of their government. Even if we admit that the more likely scenario at the mass level is that of a dynamic or reciprocal relationship between performance and evaluations, this would not preclude the possibility that continuous (dis)favorable performance of political institutions can prompt a sustained increase in political (dis)trust over time. Consequently, as Clearly and Stokes suggest, the logical explanation is that institutional performance generates increased (dis)trust over time, and the strong relationship between institutional performance and political trust (and standard measures of political trust) is best seen as a consequence rather than a cause of institutional performance (2009, 328).

Although this viewpoint does not precludes the possibility that institutional performance may generate in the long term a broad and diffuse set of attitudes of trust predicated by political cultural accounts of political support (Lipset 1961; Easton 1965; Booth and Seligson 2009), it suggests short-term variability of institutional trust at the aggregate and individual levels. This variation should be contingent on political factors. But which precise political factors are relevant to explanations of political trust?

One of the factors examined in micro-level research on institutional trust is evaluations of institutional performance. The basic intuition is that when citizens consider that their government institutions are effective and accountable, they would be more likely to see these institutions as representing them, and therefore as trustworthy. Several empirical works show that perceptions of institutional performance as well as the experience of situations reflecting the effectiveness of institutions shape individuals’ levels of political trust, but how much they do seems to vary across political contexts. Studies carried out in well-developed Western democracies find lukewarm support for indicators of institutional support. For example, Dalton’s cross-national study of industrial advanced democracies (2004, 64) finds that perceptions of institutional performance, narrowly defined in terms of economic performance, are weakly

\(^8\) On the other hand, the empirical record linking social trust to political trust is mixed (e.g., Brehm and Rahn 1997; Mishler and Rose 2001; Newton 1999). This record is best summarized by Newton who states that “There is not a close or consistent association between social and political trust, between social trust and political behavior, or between activity in voluntary associations and political attitudes of trust and confidence…” (1999, 185).
related to confidence in institutions. But, focusing on social policy performance of the Swedish government, Holmberg (1999, 155) concludes that “the hypothesis should be given the plausibility rating of ‘mixed’ or even ‘high’…” In the context of the new democracies in post-communist countries, Mishler and Rose (2001, 50-53) find that perceptions of political and economic performance are the most important explanations of individuals’ trust in political institutions, even when compared to either socialization experiences or actual institutional performance. In Africa and Latin America, the evidence shows that people’s experience with crime and corruption reduces their trust in political institutions as these experiences reflect on performance failures of state institutions (Bratton et al 2005, 228-235; Booth and Seligson 2009, 128). And in the particular context of Venezuela, Canache (2002, 88) finds that assessments of the state of the national economy are related to political support.9

People’s political biases color their judgments of institutional trust. If our measures of institutional trust reflect people’ assessments based on the performance of institutions, and as I have argued those of the institutions they know the most, then political factors such as partisanship and ideology should have a role in shaping individuals’ evaluations of trust across institutions. Once again, how much these factors affect institutional trust varies across political contexts. In the context of well-established Western democracies the evidence is mixed. Dalton (2004, 66-67) finds that ideology, and ideological extremism, have little effect on institutional trust; but Newton (1999, 181-183) finds that ideological identification has one of the largest effects on measures of trust in different political institutions. Although using a different operationalization of political trust that focuses on the policies of the party in government, Pettersson’s (1997) work demonstrates that ideology leads to decreasing political trust when people perceive a growing gap between their own ideological position and the policies of their own party (cited by Holmberg 1999, 117). Turning now to Latin America, the work by Booth and Seligson (2009, 126-128) shows political identification as represented by voting for the winning party increases institutional trust. In Venezuela, Canache (2002, 87-89) establishes that in the mid-1990s those who identified with the left and did not have ties with partisan organizations were less supportive of their political system. A few years later, Stokes and Clearly (2009, 329), comparing data from the mid-1990s and from early 2000s (from roughly the first term of Chávez’s government), show a reverse scenario on trust in Congress after Chávez took power, with those in the left now being significantly more likely to trust the Congress than those on the right.

In synthesis, the empirical evidence in disparate national and political contexts suggests that institutional trust is prominently explicated by factors related to the performance of the institutions, and to how political orientations

9 Montinolla (2009) also finds support for the effects of perceptions and experience with the Court system on institutional trust in the Philippines.
10 Canache (2002) uses a broad measure of support for the political system which includes items from both the political support-alienation scale (Muller et al. 1982), and the standard institutional trust battery.
and attitudes of individuals shape the way in which they judge the institutions that govern them.

Measuring Political Trust

Building on Easton’s influential work, several scholars have refined and extended the two-dimensional conceptualization of political support by proposing a multi-dimensional structure that takes into account different levels of political support (Norris 1999; Canache 2002; Dalton 2004; Booth and Seligson 2009). Although these works may offer slight variation regarding which categories of support they include, all of them adhere to Easton’s original political objects of support classification: the community, the regime, and political authorities. Despite differing in which facets they recommend to gauge political support at the level of the regime,11 a common denominator across these analytical schemes is their attention to political institutions.

The various rounds of the AmericasBarometer surveys include a battery of questions designed to measure respondents’ level of trust in several social and political institutions. To analyze the etiology and evolution of political trust in Venezuela, this paper focuses on those items that measure trust for fundamental institutions of democratic government: the executive, legislative, and judiciary.

The typical question of institutional trust on the AmericasBarometer surveys asks respondents to indicate how much trust they have in a given institution, using a scale from 1 “nothing” to 7 “much.” Table 1 below displays the original wording of the items measuring trust for fundamental democratic institutions, and the survey year in which they were included. The measure of political trust used in subsequent analyses is an additive index that combines these

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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Measures of Trust in Fundamental Democratic Institutions included in Venezuelan Surveys</th>
<th>Round</th>
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<tr>
<td>To what extent do you trust the Government?</td>
<td>2007-2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>To what extent do you trust the Legislative Assembly?</td>
<td>2007-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you trust the Judicial System?</td>
<td>2007-2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>To what extent do you trust the President?</td>
<td>2012-2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2006/2007-2014</td>
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11 For example Norris’ scheme distinguishes three levels of support for the regime: principles, performance and institutions (1999, 10); Booth and Seligson (2009, 52-53) adopt and extend Norris’ framework by including the category of support for local government; Dalton’s sub-categories of support for the regime include principles, norms and procedures, and institutions (2004, 7); and Canache (2002) focuses on support for a regime’s principles and political-institutional support.
items, but first some discussion and empirical validation of this measure of political trust is required.12

The 2014 Venezuelan survey did not include the question about trust in government; the only indicator measuring trust in the executive branch is the question about trust in the president, which has been included on the surveys since 2008. This means that for some of the years, and in particular the year 2014 which is the focus of this analysis, I only have a measure of trust in the president available as a means of capturing trust in the executive branch. For present purposes, however, the lack of the “trust in government” item does represent an unmanageable problem. It is reasonable to assume that, at least in the Latin American context, respondents strongly associate the president with the government; thus, these items tap the same construct.

When Latin American citizens think of the government they first and foremost have the president in mind. This intuition is grounded in the centrality of the president — the head of executive power — in Latin American political systems. Earlier analyses of presidentialism in Latin America emphasized the dominance of presidents in most political systems in this region (e.g., Hambloch 1936; Christensen 1951; Pierson and Gil 1957; Davis 1958; Stokes 1959; Lambert 1969; Dix 1977) and contrasted this feature with the balance of powers characteristic of the presidential system in the United States (Mainwaring 1990, p. 160). Recent studies in this area offer a more nuanced understanding of the nature of presidentialism in Latin America, speaking to the limits and constrains that presidents face, as well as to the complexity of inter-branch relationships. Still, as Corrales reminds us, Latin America is known worldwide as the land of presidentialism (2013, 13). Furthermore, presidential systems in Latin America are notably personalistic — compared to parliamentary systems — in that the personality of the candidates for the chief executive is generally quite important (Mainwaring 1990, 170). Thus, the centrality of the presidency, and of the president, as the most important organization of the executive supports the suggestion that the “trust in government” and “trust in the president” items can be seen as comparable measures.13

Empirical support for this claim can be established by examining the correlation coefficients between these two items, and between two indexes of political trust including each of the items of trust as the measure of trust in the executive branch, because both items were included on the 2008 and 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys.14

12 Descriptive statistics for the institutional trust items and for the additive measure are included in Table A1 in the appendix.
13 Research on attitudes toward specific political institutions demonstrates these attitudes are linked across institutions; and that support for the president influences support for Congress and the Supreme Court (Montinola 2009, 286).
14 The original scales of the individual trust items, and of the political trust index’s were converted to a 0 to 1 scale, with (0) indicating ‘nothing’ and (1) ‘much.’ See Appendix for detailed question wording.
Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics for trust in government and trust in the president, and for the corresponding political trust indexes. For all 18 nations in the region, the correlation coefficients between “trust in government” and “trust in the president” are strong and statistically significant; the mean correlation was .69 (p ≤ .001) in 2008 and .68 (p ≤ .001) in 2010. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients between the index of political trust including trust in government and the index of political trust including trust in the president reaches a value of .94 (p ≤ .001) in both years, indicating the similarity of these two measures of political trust.

There is some variability in the strength of the correlation coefficients across nations, with the coefficient reaching a low value of .55 in Honduras and high of .8 in Venezuela in 2008. Likewise, in 2010 the minimum value of .52 is again obtained in Honduras, with the maximum of .83 observed in Venezuela. In eight countries the correlation coefficient between the individual trust items exceeds the average coefficient value in 2008, while in 2010 this coefficient value has higher than the average in nine nations (see Table 2A in the appendix). Interestingly Venezuela is the country with the highest correlation between trust in government and trust in the president in both years, suggesting that these items behave in an especially similar manner in this country, and that comparatively speaking Venezuelan respondents associated the government with the president even more than in other countries in the region.

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Correlation Coefficients of Measures of Political Trust</th>
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<td><strong>Minimum</strong></td>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>Inter-scale</td>
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Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2007-2014; 18 countries; p ≤ .001
Note: inter-item comparisons are for the trust in government and trust in the president items. Inter-scale comparisons are for indexes that include, respectively, either the trust in government or the trust in the president items, along with common items regarding trust in the legislature and judiciary.

In sum, the empirical results suggest that the items “trust in government” and “trust in the president” are highly correlated across 18 Latin American countries, and that measures substituting one of these items for the
other are nearly perfectly correlated. These findings provide assurance about using the item of “trust in the president” as part of a general measure of trust in fundamental democratic institutions. For the Venezuelan case in particular, this test can be interpreted as an initial indication of the possible spill-over of Chávez’s influence on other political institutions of the Venezuelan system; this is the question that I turn to next.

**Political Trust in Post-Chávez Venezuela**

The 2014 AmericasBarometer data offer a singular opportunity to examine the nature of political trust in post-Chávez Venezuela. The survey was conducted in March 2014, one year after the death of President Chávez, and the election of his successor Nicolás Maduro. Because any analysis of attitudinal change toward the political system in post-Chávez Venezuela entails placing respondents’ attitudes in a comparative perspective, I first look at how Venezuelan respondents support fundamental institutions of government in the period 2007-2012, a time that essentially parallels Chávez’s second term in office. Likewise, I examine whether the level of political trust in Venezuela was higher or lower than in the rest of Latin American countries.

Figure 1 displays the mean level of political trust in 18 Latin American countries included in four previous rounds of the AmericasBarometer surveys (2006-07, 2008, 2010 and 2012). The empirical results show that Venezuela is not an outlier regarding levels of trust in state institutions. The average level of political trust in Venezuela (0.48) closely matches the average level of political trust in the region (0.47). For this period, Uruguay was the country with the highest average level of political trust (0.60) followed by Colombia, Mexico, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Chile, and Costa Rica, all with values greater than the mid-point of the political trust scale. Paraguay was the country with the lowest level of political trust, closely followed by Peru and Ecuador. If anything, Venezuela might be seen as the most typical country of the region.

This finding is puzzling. How is it that after years of systematic efforts by Chávez and his political allies – the chavistas – to reconfigure liberal democratic institutions, Venezuelan respondents do not differ in a significant manner from respondents in other Latin American countries in how much confidence they have in fundamental state institutions? One reasonable expectation would be that after years of hegemonic control by Chávez and his associates in the Asamblea Legislativa (Legislative Assembly), the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (Supreme Tribunal of Justice), and other state institutions, Venezuelans would be mindful of the institutional democratic deficit in their country, and accordingly be distrustful of these institutions. Yet, as Figure 1 shows, Venezuelan respondents are not particularly distrustful of state institutions; and furthermore that they are not an anomaly in the Latin American context.

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15 For discussion of how Venezuelans’ understand of democracy during Chávez era, see Canache (2012).
An alternative explanation of why aggregate levels of institutional trust in Venezuela are not significantly lower when compared with the region as a whole is that Venezuelan respondents’ trust government institutions because they trust Chávez. In this account it is precisely Chávez’s strong political clout that explains why, in the aggregate, Venezuelans exhibit moderate levels of political trust. Trusting the president made citizens more likely to trust other state institutions regardless of the institutions’ democratic performance. Hence, in this view, the pattern of moderate political trust in Venezuela during Chávez’s second term is the result of a spillover effect, or the transfer of trust from the president to other state institutions. If this intuition is correct, then we should observe a decline in political trust in the post-Chavista era.

**H1:** If average political trust in state institutions in Venezuela was driven by trust in President Chávez, then we should observe a discernible decline in the average level of political trust in the post-Chávez era.

Figure 2 provides information supporting this first intuition. The mean level of political trust in Venezuela drastically dropped in 2014 compared with average levels in previous years. The average trust in political institutions experienced drastic shifts between 2010 and 2014. First, trust in institutions sharply increased in 2012 compared with 2010 (mean difference = −.097; $p \leq .001$); and then suffered an abrupt drop from 2012 to 2014 (mean difference = .173; $p \leq .001$). When the 2012 Venezuelan survey was conducted in February-March 2012, news about the health condition of President Chávez was already known by the
Venezuelan people. Chávez announced that he was suffering from cancer in June 2011 and reassured the public that he could continue fulfilling the duties of his job. Thus, at the moment of the 2012 survey, people had had time to assimilate and to likely become accustomed to the new political dynamic imposed by Chávez’s poor health.

The months that follow until the eventual death of President Chávez were marked by great political uncertainty, with the government and relevant actors of the power structure in the country quickly moving to assure the constitutional bases of their political survival. In March 2012, the National Electoral Council (CNE) decided to set the presidential elections for October 7, 2012—two months in advanced of the expected date. The incumbent party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) postulated Hugo Chávez as its candidate, and he entered for the second time a race seeking his reelection as president. President Chávez was re-elected with 55 percent of the votes in October 7, 2012. Five months later Venezuelans awakened to the news of his death. Although I cannot track public opinion movement during this time interval in a more precise manner so as to determine which specific political events are associated with the shifts we observe, it is clear that in 2012 Venezuelan respondents were on average more trusting of state institutions than in prior years, and that after Chávez left the political scene, trust in state institutions plummeted. At best this piece of evidence offers mixed and indirect support for the idea that respondents’ trust in fundamental institutions was associated with the presence of Hugo Chávez in office. It is conceivable that the death of the president precipitated the observed decline in institutional trust, but these data provide no means to definitively rule out the possibility that some other factor drove the change, and that trust would have declined by a similar degree even had Chávez remained in office.
Conceivably a more direct approach to the analysis of political trust in post-Chávez Venezuela focuses on the structure of political trust attitudes. Maybe President Chávez affected the way in which citizens decide to trust their institutions by providing structure and cohesiveness to their judgments. Had this Chávez-based structuring effect occurred, high levels of attitudinal consistency in Venezuelan respondents’ levels of political trust should be observed.

How can we assess the attitudinal consistency of political trust in Venezuela? Assessment of the degree of attitudinal consistency of Venezuelan respondents can be provided first by comparing the internal consistency of respondents’ reports of trust in institutions, and by contrasting the dispersion of these responses with similar marks for respondents elsewhere in Latin America. The top panel of Figure 3 shows the alpha coefficient scores for respondents in 18 Latin American countries in the period 2006-2012; the inter-item correlation of institutional trust is higher in Venezuela (average score is .850 versus .708 in the rest of Latin America) than in any other Latin American country, suggesting that at least during this period the respondents’ attitudes of trust exhibited great consistency.

The bottom panel of the figure displays the aggregate standard deviation for respondents in each country. The standard deviations themselves are calculated at the individual level, meaning they represent how disparate a given respondent’s answers are to the key trust items. At the aggregate level, this measure summarizes the attitudinal divergence of respondents in each country. Overall, the range of attitudinal dispersion is narrow; ranging from a minimum value of .126 (Paraguay 2008) to a maximum value of .257 (Ecuador 2008), with an average standard deviation score of .182. In Venezuela, the average dispersion...
(.157) was below the regional average, again suggesting that respondents in this country hold a quite coherent bundle of attitudes toward state institutions.

The basic intuition of the *structuring effect* hypothesis is that President Chávez affected how Venezuelans see their state institutions by providing a structuring force for making their evaluations; simply put, those Venezuelans who trusted Chávez are more likely to trust the state institutions and those who were negative toward him also were more negative toward the nation’s core institutions. If this intuition is correct, we should observe a very tight and cohesive bundle of institutional trust attitudes during the time that President Chávez was in office and a decline in cohesiveness in 2014.

**H2:** If President Chávez provided structure to Venezuelan respondents’ attitudes of political trust, then we should observe that their attitudes should be less cohesive in 2014 than in previous years.

Data from the 2014 Venezuelan survey show that there was not erosion of the attitudinal consistency of Venezuelan respondents. Attitudinal consistency regarding the state institutions remains a distinctive characteristic of the public in the post-Chavista phase. The figure below shows that in line with previous years, the inter-item correlation of political trust in quite high (.886) indicating that respondents scoring high in one of the items tend do so in the other items; more telling however is the fact that the measure of respondents’ attitudinal dispersion actually
experiences slight (although not statistically significant) decrease. In short, the empirical evidence suggests that at the aggregate level, in 2014 there was not a major shift on how the population trusts state institutions. Yet a puzzle remains the level of trust in state institutions suffered a sharp decline in 2014, but at the same time Venezuelan respondents remain (dis)trusting state institutions in a reliable manner. What could account for this inconsistency? This coexistence of these two dynamics of decreasing but reliably institutional trusting in 2014 could be explained if we find that the swing on levels of trust in Venezuela has followed a path of increasing polarization.

**Polarized Trust**

Polarization occurs when large portions of the citizens hold opposing political views or positions, whether on individual issues or in their views of government as a whole. When citizens divide on whether to trust those institutions that are intended to represent them, the scenario is not auspicious for governance and stability in a country. Operationally, we can say that there is a polarized political trust environment if a majority of citizens in the country have formed exclusively negative or positive judgment toward the state institutions. That is, polarization would not exist with respect to institutional trust if most citizens offer mixed views; conversely, if we find that large numbers of citizens express strong and consistent trust while comparably large numbers express distrust, that pattern would signal polarization.

To establish the existence of polarization in 2014, I first need to develop a measure that captures the idea that an individual holds exclusive and consistent
judgments across multiple institutions. The institutional trust questions included on the AmericasBarometer survey asked respondents to score their level of (dis)trust using a scale ranging from 1 (nothing) to 7 (much); I consider all individual responses with scores 1, 2, or 3 to be indicators of distrust, and all scores of 5, 6, or 7 as indicating trust. Respondents are considered to be exclusively distrusting if they offered ratings in the distrust range on all three items in question, those pertaining to Venezuela’s president, legislature and judiciary. Conversely, respondents are categorized as exclusively trusting if all three answers had values of 5, 6 or 7. The residual mixed/neutral category includes respondents who offered mixed assessments of the three institutions (e.g., values of 2, 6 and 7) and those who offered one or more neutral judgments (any response of “4”). In the aggregate, evidence of polarization exists when the sum of exclusive responses of distrust and trust exceeds the sum of mixed and neutral responses. For example, if 30 percent of respondents offered only “trust” answers, 30 percent offered only “distrust” answers, and the remaining 40 percent were neutral or mixed, this would be taken as evidence of polarization.

Political trust in Venezuela not only tumbled in 2014, but, in doing so, it magnified attitudinal polarization. Figure 5 shows that a large portion, more precisely 45 percent of respondents, reported that none of the three branches of government was worthy of their trust.

From 2012 to 2014, the proportion of respondents that distrusted all three state institutions increased by 24 percent points (p ≤ .05). As to polarization, Figure 5 also shows that the sum of the exclusive trust and exclusive distrust groups reached 61 percent in 2014. By the standards I have established, this
mark signifies the existence of polarization in 2014. Further, 2014 is the only the second year, after 2010, in which clear polarization is observed, and the 61 percent mark in 2014 tops the 56 percent mark in 2010, as well as the values in the high 40s seen in the other three years.

The evidence of polarization and near-polarization in Venezuela perhaps should be unsurprising. Chavez’s rule has been characterized as the most polarizing government in Venezuela, and in Latin American since the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s (Corrales 2005, 105). As the first years of President Maduro’s regime unfold, there is no sign of moderation, either in rhetoric or in policy. The polarization in political trust seen in 2014 is a reflection, and consequence, of a deep division in Venezuelan politics and society.

If the present evidence of polarization toward national institutions in 2014 is correct, Venezuelans themselves presumably should concur that their nation is divided. The AmericasBarometer survey included two questions measuring opinion about political polarization in the country.16 Figure 6A displays the distribution of respondents along a scale measuring the extent of political division in Venezuela. Overall, just over 75 percent of respondents see political division (scale values of 5, 6 or 7), and an extraordinary large number of respondents, 47 percent, believe that there is much political division in the country. The next chart, Figure 6b, shows the response pattern on a question inquiring whether the polarization in the country has become more serious than in last year. The evidence indicates that Venezuelans think the political climate changed in the last twelve months, with nearly 80 percent of respondents seeing a rise in polarization. In short, Venezuelans believe they live in deeply divided country, and they see that this polarization as having grown more severe following the death of Hugo Chávez.

To this point we have established three things. The first point is that trust in fundamental state institutions in Venezuela plunged in 2014, signifying a decline in trust in the post-Chávez era. The second point is that Venezuelans’ views of political trust continue to exhibit significant consistency despite the aforementioned decline in political trust. Venezuelans generally do not differentiate much when assessing the president, the legislature and the judiciary, but instead link these three assessments. Third, the growing distrust seen in 2014 is coupled with a growth in polarization. In 2014, over 60 percent of Venezuelans expressed either uniformly trusting or distrusting views, the high mark for polarization among the years examined here. Additionally, Venezuelans themselves recognize this polarization, with sizeable majorities believing that political polarization exists in Venezuela and that it has intensified since the death of Hugo Chávez. The remainder of this paper seeks to improve our understanding of the nature and significance of this phenomenon.

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16 For wording of the questions about polarization (POLZ1 and POLZ2) see Appendix.
Explaining Political Trust in Venezuela

Students of Venezuelan politics have reported how the institutional bases of the Venezuelan state have changed since Chavismo has ruled in Venezuela.
particular, the legislature and the judicial institutions in Venezuela have largely become auxiliary powers of the president, a change reflected in the interconnected attitudes toward these institutions noted above. This process began early in Chávez’s rule when, a week after the approval of the 1999 Constitution, the Constituent Assembly decreed the “Power Public Transition Regime,” disbanding all existing institutions, including the Congress and the Supreme Court.12 The strategy of weakening the checks-and-balances institutions continued through various means, but it reached its climax in 2005 with the election of a 100 percent pro-Chavista National Assembly, in an electoral process boycotted by the opposition parties. The ultimate outcome was the concentration of power in the president and his allies at the expenses of other national powers (Corrales 2007, 2013; López Maya 2011).

In light of the cross-national depiction of levels of political trust in Latin America reported earlier in this paper, it seems that in the eyes of the Venezuelan public the change in the nation’s institutional structure did not immediately result in a parallel decline in political trust, notwithstanding the decrease observed in 2014. Following Chávez’s death, Venezuelans who previously supported the president and his regime or who held mixed views were put to the test. The analyses reported above reveal that many did not transfer their trust to other institutions in 2014. Chávez’s spillover effect dissipated, with the consequence that, at least in the short term, President Maduro has been unable to sustain even a moderate level of institutional trust. Further, we have seen that the public’s trust in institutions polarized in 2014, when respondents that may have previously held mixed or neutral positions about these institutions became skeptical, even critical, in the post-Chávez era.

What explain the polarization of political trust in Venezuela? I have argued that for many Venezuelan citizens trust in political institutions was conditional on the trust they felt in President Chávez. Left without the centerpiece of their trust, many seemingly are now less eager to transfer their trust to other state institutions. We are pressed to inquire then who now trusts and who distrusts the institutions of government in Venezuela? Systematic attention to those individual level factors associated with the judgments of (dis)trust can provide insight on the polarized scenario we have uncovered.

A basic idea motivates subsequent empirical tests. People trust an institution when they believe that the institution acts in their interest (regardless of what the institution actually does, which is another matter). Before I present the results of multivariate analyses regarding the sources of political trust, I examine the extent to which respondents in Venezuela believe that their government is responsive. Research on citizen competence emphasizes that a sense of political efficacy is critical for the health and vitality of democratic politics (e.g., Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Campbell et al. 1960; Finkel 1985). The construct of external efficacy refers to citizens’ conviction that the government is

12 Then, the Constituent Assembly appointed provisional authorities, until a new National Assembly was elected in July 2000. Corrales describes these decisions as acts that share the logic of “…abolishing all institutions in which Chávez could potentially face asymmetry, all done in a completely closed process…” (2013, 32)
responsive to their needs and demands. Hence, external efficacy logically is related to trust in government (Niemi et al. 1991). External efficacy is measured with a seven-category item on which respondents are asked the extent to which they agree with the statement “Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think.” Over a quarter of respondents (27.4 percent) indicated some level of agreement with the statement in 2014. However, over twice as many (59.8 percent) expressed a lack of efficacy, including nearly a third of respondents (31.8 percent) who strongly disagreed that those who govern are response to people like them. Thus, in 2014 a majority of Venezuelans do not have faith in the government in terms of its responsiveness. Given the established link between efficacy and trust, it follows that among those who do not see the government as being responsive, we should expect higher levels of political distrust.

The relationship between external efficacy and system support is a consistent finding in the political support literature (Canache 2002; Kornberg and et al. 1980; Kornberg and Clark 1992), and the 2014 data show this is the case in Venezuela as well. Although the measures of political efficacy and trust in national institutions are strongly correlated ($\alpha=.651$, $p<.01$), this relationship does not give rise to an unequivocal interpretation. It is difficult to establish causal relationships when studying mass attitudes via cross-sectional survey data, and this is an instance in which we can suspect endogeneity is present. Furthermore, I suspect that in a polarized context like that of Venezuela in 2014, people’s understandings of government responsiveness should be highly constrained by their political predispositions, a point I examine next.

The figures below show the mean values of respondents’ beliefs about the responsiveness of the government, broken down by ideological leaning and vote choice, respectively. In Figure 7a, we see, as expected, that for left-leaning respondents, whose views are aligned with the government, the average level of external efficacy is dramatically higher than for centrist and right-leaning individuals. Likewise, in Figure 7b, we see that the mean of political efficacy is higher for those respondents who voted for President Maduro (winner vote) as compared with those who did not in the 2013 election. These findings suggest that Venezuelan respondents’ assessments of how much their government answers to their interests is colored by their political preferences.
Overall, the evidence presented to this point offers additional support for the idea that political polarization is widespread in Venezuela. Venezuelans think that there is polarization in the country, and that this situation had gotten worse by 2014. Further, their assessment of whether the government cares about people like them is strongly shaped by their political predispositions. The
question I try to answer next is how Venezuelan respondents connect the dots between their interests and the institutions of the state.

Based on the literature on institutional trust, I anticipate that people’s judgments of trust are shaped by their beliefs that those institutions are performing according to people’s interests. To make such an inference, individuals need information about the performance of the institutions. This information may derive from direct experience with the institutions and/or the reputational performance of the institutions. I would expect that those individuals who have a positive evaluation of the institutions will be more likely to trust them than those who have a negative opinion of institutional performance. Therefore:

**H3:** The more favorably respondents evaluate the performance of institutions of government; the more likely respondents will be to trust those institutions

The dominance of Chavismo in Venezuela over the last 16 years apparently has triggered polarization in this country. When polarization is common, citizens are prone to make sense of the political world through heavy reliance on their core political predispositions as guides. Examining data obtained after the death of President Chávez, we have uncovered a climate of polarized opinion regarding political institutions. This indicates that polarization continues to permeate Venezuelan politics. Thus, I anticipate that fundamental political cues such ideology and partisan preferences will have strong effects on respondents’ judgments of trust toward institutions of government. Regarding ideology, my expectation is that respondents who identify with the left will be more likely to trust the institutions of government. Because these respondents see congruence between their own political values and the government ideology, they will be more likely to express their trust toward the institutional structure more generally.

**H4:** Left-leaning respondents will be more likely to trust the institutions of government than centrist or right-leaning respondents

Recall that this paper builds on the premise that Venezuelans’ opinions about the institutional structure of government are driven primarily by their attitudes toward the president. Thus, those respondents whose partisan preferences align with the president will be most likely to trust all institutions of government than those who do not align with the government.

**H5:** Respondents who voted for President Maduro in the election of October 2013 are more likely to trust the institutions of government than those who did not vote for the government.

I model political trust as a function of evaluations of institutional performance, ideological self-identification, and winner/loser status of the
respondents with respect to the 2013 election. In addition, the model includes a series of control variables. For guidance, I draw mainly on research carried out in the Latin American context. For example, Booth and Seligson (2009) find that the size of residential area matters for trust in national institutions, with people living in larger cities and towns (and especially the capital) expressing more distrust for institutions. This effect could be, as the authors indicate, a story about information. People living in more urbanized areas should have more information about the national institutions, and this information should affect their levels of trust. Hence, we should expect that, on average, more information leads to more skepticism toward government.

This thesis can be tested in a more direct manner by modeling the potential effect of exposure to political news. I expect that individuals who regularly follow the political news are more likely to have a more comprehensive and perhaps nuanced understanding of the workings of national institutions. Therefore, exposure to political news should be related to greater criticism and skepticism of institutions. To account for these expected effects, the model of political trust includes controls for place of residency size and level of exposure to political news.

The model also controls for standard demographic variables: gender, education, wealth, and age. Education provides individuals with the skills and capabilities to process the information required to evaluate the institutions; therefore, on average, I expect that more educated respondents will be more critical of the national institutions than less educated respondents. Given the rhetoric and policy priority of the Chavista-era governments, I expect that poor individuals will be more likely to trust national institutions because they believe these institutions are working in favor of the poor. Thus, trust in national institutions should be inversely related to respondents’ socio-economic status. Finally, I presume that younger people are less likely to distrust national institutions than older people. In 2014, 47 percent of respondents in the sample are between 18 and 34 years older. This means that the adult political socialization of these individuals has only taken place during the Chavista era. Therefore, I expect that younger individuals will be relatively trustful of national institutions. Lastly, although gender is included as a control, I do not have a strong expectation regarding gender-based differences in support for national institutions.

Results from a fully-specified multivariate regression model are depicted in Figure 8. Coefficients estimates for this model along with a series of limited models (one with only control variables, then three in which each of the three key predictors is isolated in a specification that includes one key predictor and the control variables) are reported in Table A3 in the appendix. All the variables included in the model have been recoded from 0 to 1, to facilitate interpretation. In Figure 8, the dot corresponding to each variable label is the point estimate for that variable, whereas the bracket surrounding that point estimate is the 95 percent confidence interval. If the bracket encompasses zero, then the coefficient

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18 Wording and descriptive statistics of the variables are included in Table A1.
is statistically insignificant. The results in Figure 8 tell a clear story. First, contrary to expectations, all effects for the control variables are statistically insignificant, and all center quite near zero. Second, all three of the key variables under consideration — ideology, winner-loser (i.e., vote for or against Maduro), and evaluation of corruption in Venezuela — produce effects that reach the highest level of statistical significance, and all are substantively quite strong. For instance, the -0.202 coefficient on the corruption variables signifies that trust drops by over 0.20 points on a 0 to 1 scale as perceived corruption rises from its lowest to its highest. Third, the -0.377 coefficient for ideology is especially large, indicating that ideology strongly structures trust judgments. Fourth, although only three variables in the model reach statistical significance, the model’s adjusted $R^2$ level reaches 0.475, indicating that the model accounts for nearly half of the variation in Venezuelans’ levels of trust in political institutions. Collectively, these results establish that trust in Venezuelan political institutions is very much a reflection of citizens’ core political predispositions and preferences. Trust abounds primarily among those on the ideological left, those who voted for President Maduro, and those who believe that political corruption in Venezuela is uncommon.

![Figure 8. OLS Regression Coefficients for Political Trust](image)

**The Military and Popular Power**

To this point, I have discussed the nature of public attitudes in Venezuela toward the nation’s institutions. To put this discussion in full context, it is necessary at this point to step back and consider the specific types of changes in institutional structure that have been implemented in recent years, and, to the extent possible,
to assess public opinion regarding this new institutional structure. With the sanctioning of the 1999 Constitution, the political project of Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian movement began laying the foundation of a dynamic of institutional and political change that is playing out still today, and whose eventual outcomes are yet to be known. This has been a complicated process, with both advancements and setbacks over time, as President Chávez tested the limits of his force within his own coalition, against his political opponents, and the Venezuelan people more generally. The continuing process of institutional experimentation in Venezuela comprises both formal and informal mechanisms aiming sometimes to strengthen, other times to weaken the power of existing institutions. The Venezuelan political system has been transformed. In some cases, old institutions have been fully dismantled, and in their place have been created completely new, and sometimes competing, institutions.19

Although it is risky to evaluate progress and reach conclusions regarding social and political processes that are still in flux, it is clear that the political and institutional restructuring taking place in Venezuela locates two organizations, the Bolivarian National Armed Force (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana, FANB), and the Communal Councils (Consejos Comunales), as crucial elements of the power structure in post-Chávez Venezuela. Although these are not the only important actors in the post-Chavista power structure,20 the FABN and Communal Councils are constitutionally, and organically, linked to the institutional architecture of the Venezuelan state. Communal Councils, in particular, embody a conspicuous case of having been constructed under the parameters of the “Socialism of the 21st Century” model. This marks them as an alternative form of social and political organization that coexists with, but could potentially replace, the more established politico-institutional structure in Venezuela.

Why the FABN? Hugo Chávez’s political project was crucially linked to the military since the early 1980s.21 Once he became president, the military emerged as a central and strategic actor in the process of social and political

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19 The expansion of presidential powers in the 1999 Constitution (Corrales 2013, 32) is an example of strengthening the executive power; while the repeated use of enabling powers by President Chávez and now President Maduro in essence means the relinquishing of the National Assembly’s legislative powers to the Executive branch. Both President Chavez and President Maduro created government agencies with parallel and/or competing responsibilities to key regional governments administrated by opposition forces. For example, in March 2013 President Maduro decreed the creation of the ‘Corporation for the Integral Development of the State of Miranda’, a parallel organization to the state government.

20 A complete account must consider the political-bureaucratic structure linked to the Socialist United Party of Venezuela (PSUV), as well as other social organizations (for example, the Bolivarian Circles and the numerous colectivos), and other military organizations such as the Bolivarian National Militia (Milicia Nacional Bolivariana). (Mansilla Blanco, 2014).

21 The original nucleus of the Bolivarian movement was military officials. Since 1983, Hugo Chávez belonged to a clandestine group called Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR200) whose objectives included the recovery of patriotic values, dignifying of military careers, and fighting against corruption (Lopez Maya 2011, 215).
transformation invoked by the Bolivarian project. Additionally, the political role of the military significantly increased in tandem with the polarization and political confrontation in the country. As President Chávez confronted significant political challenges during his first term, the Armed Forces acquired a principal and active role for the survival and sustenance of Chavismo. Today, a significant number of both retired and current military men occupy top positions in ministries and state agencies, and multiple governorships are in the hands of former military men. This situation attests to political weight of the military in contemporary Venezuela. If anything, the most recent laws approved by President Maduro on the last day of the enabling period of limited lawmaking powers granted to him by the National Assembly suggest that the FANB remains a pivotal power holder in post-Chávez Venezuela.

*Why the Communal Councils?* An emboldened President Chávez announced, in the aftermath of his 2006 impressive electoral victory, the radicalization the Bolivarian project into 21st Century Socialism. For this new phase, President Chávez proposed the notion of “Popular Power,” that is, the power of organized popular sectors acting as a part of the state rather than as autonomous social actors (Canache, 2012). The central instruments for the creation and consolidation of the “Popular Power” are the Communal Councils. The Communal Councils are a participatory innovation operating at the micro-local level. The Communal Councils appeared for the first time in the 1999 Constitution linked to existing participatory organizations at the municipal level, but it was not until 2005 that President Chávez actively promoted this mechanism of popular organization.

Two legal instruments, the 2006 Law of Communal Councils and the 2009 Organic Law of Communal Councils, define the nature, organization, financing, functions and responsibilities of the communal councils. The Communal Councils represent a sort of “…micro-government at the community level…” (Golfrank 2011, 40), closely connected to the central government through the Minister for the Popular Power of the Communes and Social Movements (Ministerio del Poder Popular para las Comunas y los

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22 In the early years of Chávez’s first term, the Armed Forces were fundamental actor in the design and implementation of the Plan Bolívar 2000, key piece of the state developmental strategy.  
23 These include the attempted coup in April 2002, the oil stoppage (December 2002-February 2003); and significant street violence preceding the 2004 recall referendum.  
24 Specifically, the Organic Law of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces approved in November 19, 2014.  
25 Specifically, to the Consejos Locales de Planificación Pública at municipal level.  
26 Art. 2 of the 2009 Law establishes that the Communal Councils “… son instancias de participación, articulación e integración entre los ciudadanos, ciudadanas y las diversas organizaciones comunitarias, movimientos sociales y populares, que permiten al pueblo organizado ejercer el gobierno comunitario y la gestión directa de las políticas públicas y proyectos orientados a responder a las necesidades, potencialidades y aspiraciones de las comunidades, en la construcción del nuevo modelo de sociedad socialista de igualdad, equidad y justicia social.”  
27 Golfrank (2011, 40) explains that Communal Councils can be established by a small number of families varying according to size of the locality (for example between 150 y 400 families in urban areas, or a minimum of 20 families in rural areas, and about 10 families in indigenous communities). These councils are responsible for promoting, designing, implementing and supervising community projects.
Movimientos Sociales), responsible for the promotion, registry, and financing of these popular organizations. Students of civil society in Venezuela have documented the rapid growth of these social organizations since 2005. For example, Goldrank (2011, 44) states that in 2010 there were about 21,050 Communal Councils registered in the Ministry of Communes, a figure suggesting that close to 8 million Venezuelan residents have participated in these organizations (see also Hawkins 2010, 33). Hawkins (2010), using data from the 2007 AmericasBarometer survey, finds that 36 percent of respondents reported to have participated in a meeting of a Communal Council in the last 12 months, again a number that suggests that a high portion of the population (close to 6 million Venezuelans) participate in Communal Councils. The 2013 Communal Census carried out by the Ministry of Communes in November 2013 estimates that there are in Venezuela a total of 40,035 Communal Councils and 1,401 Communes, figures that suggest the sustained growth of these organizations as fundamental units of the new power structure.

This part of the empirical analysis seeks to examine two questions. First, do these two institutional bases of power in post-Chávez Venezuela enjoy substantial support among the Venezuelan public, or has the decline of institutional trust detected for the national governmental institutions reaches them as well? Second, does the (dis)trust for the FABN and the Communal Councils fit the pattern of polarization uncovered above with respect to attitudes regarding Venezuela’s national institutions?

The AmericasBarometer survey includes questions about trust in the Armed Forces and the Communal Councils. These questions are asked in the same format as those I analyzed above for the national institutions of government. Because of this, we can compare the levels of public trust across all institutions. Figure 9 shows the mean level of trust across institutions from 2007-2014. The military was able to maintain relatively high institutional support for most of this period, and trust in the military always outpaces trust in the core national institutions. However, it appears like the FABN suffered from the decline in trust that took place between 2012 and 2014. The gap between trust in the FABN and trust in national institutions has declined to half the size of the gap in 2007, and, for the first time, trust in the military has dipped below the mid-point of the scale. The mean level of trust in Communal Councils declined, too. The difference in trust between 2012 and 2014 is twelve points (statistically significant at p ≤ .001). These results confirm that in the first year of post-Chávez Venezuela, the public’s attitudes toward not only the traditional institutions of

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28 The current Ministry of the Popular Power of the Communes and Social Movements was created in October 2013 from the merging of the Ministry of Popular Power for Participation and Social Protection, and the Ministry of Popular Power for the Communal Economy.

29 The 2013 Census also reports that there are 1,401 Communes considered the basic unit of the Communal States. The Communes represents the newest organizational innovation introduced with the 2010 Organic Law of Communes. They are a broader form of popular organization conformed by voceros (delgates) of the Communal Councils) and other social organizations of a given territorial locality.

30 For wording of these questions and descriptive statistics see Appendix.
the national governmental, but also toward institutions closely linked and identified with the socialist political project, suffered noteworthy declines in public esteem.

One of the most interesting insights we get from these data is that the Communal Councils had accumulated substantial support in 2012 (the first year data is available), suggesting the inroad this alternate power structure has made in Venezuela. Even though there was a decline in 2014, trust in Communal Councils parallels the level of trust in national governmental institutions. Whether the movement in public opinion toward the Communal Councils reflects a short-term shift or deep attitudinal change is an open question that merits further investigation.

An initial step in this direction is to examine if trust in the FABN and the Communal Councils is as polarized as trust in the governmental institutions. The answer is a resounding yes. The data in Figure 10 indicate that Venezuelan respondents are as divided in their views of the military and the Communal Councils as they are in their judgments of trust of national institutions. Respondents who identify with the left and respondents who voted for President Maduro in the 2013 elections see the FABN and the Community Councils as considerably more trustworthy than centrist and right-leaning respondents. The high trust scores for these institutions among leftist respondents suggest that the active role the military assumed since the
late 1990s in Venezuelan politics and its identification with the revolutionary project has created sympathies among a sector of the population that historically was suspicious of the military. Likewise, leftist respondents are more likely to trust the Community Councils, and trust in the Councils is especially pronounced among those respondents who voted for President Maduro.

This preliminary insight into the support for relevant institutional actors of the Chavista political project suggests that polarization in Venezuelan society reaches all areas of public opinion. The politicization of the military certainly reflects on the citizenship and as a result Venezuelans are divided by political considerations when evaluating the military, yet this institution comparatively speaking managed to maintain relatively a high level of trust until 2012. The significant drop we observe in 2014 may be the public’s reaction to the role of the military in repressing the student protest in February 2014, which occurred very close to the time in which the AmericasBarometer survey was conducted. Regardless of its cause, the divided opinion about this institution may signal the difficulty inherent in the rebuilding of institutional trust. Additionally, the overall level of support that novel institutions such as Communal Councils have accumulated hints to a successful strategy of institutional innovation. Citizens’ trust in the Communal Councils is clearly divided as well, a situation that likely affect the chances of institutional strengthening of these basic units of the Popular Power.

**Conclusions**

Scholarship on political trust generally accepts, with notable exceptions, that the public’s trust in fundamental institutions of governance is important for
democracy to operate, and even to survive. Research on political support mostly presumes that institutional trust represents broad, diffuse support for the political regime. However, survey-based empirical research has a difficult time establishing the direction of causality between political trust and broader attitudes toward democracy. Thus, a safe and more plausible assumption is that what an institution does (or fails to do) and how citizens perceive it affect each other. Hence, I started this paper with a notion of trust, and of institutional trust in particular, that conceives citizens’ judgments of trust as the outcome of citizens’ beliefs about what institutions are and do. Additionally, I assumed that in making these judgments citizens are not dispassionate. Their decisions are shaped by their political predispositions and biases. With this in mind, my objective was to study the nature of political trust in post-Chávez Venezuela.

With focus on AmericasBarometer data, the empirical analysis used temporal and regional comparative strategies to gauge the meaning of the level of trust in the post-Chavista period. The evidence indicates that at least concerning levels of institutional trust, Venezuela is not an outlier in Latin America. Aggregate levels of institutional trust in Venezuela are moderate, and close to the mean regional score. Although this could be interpreted to imply that Venezuelan citizens are unperturbed by the reality of weakened check-and-balance institutions, a more nuanced examination of the data revealed that Venezuelan respondents, in contrast to the rest of Latin American respondents, hold highly structured and polarized attitudes toward fundamental institutions of government.

To explain the structured and polarized nature of political trust in Venezuela, the paper developed a theory of institutional trust that emphasizes the information-processing strategies individuals use when making political judgments toward these institutions. In Venezuela, I argue Chávez was, and still remains, an essential guide for citizen relating to political institutions. As a result, ideological orientations and political preferences became default devices citizens use when deciding whether to trust or Venezuelan institutions.

The analysis of 2014 data demonstrates that trust in national institutions suffered a sudden fall compared with previous years. President Maduro did not benefit from a Chávez-type spill-over effect, yet Venezuelan respondents’ trust judgments remained quite cohesive in 2014. Multivariate analysis of the sources of institutional trust in 2014 revealed that those respondents who perceived high levels of corruption in the government (a proxy for the perceived failure of government institutions to operate effectively) are less likely to trust the national institutions. Leftist respondents and those who voted for President Maduro in the 2013 elections are more trustful of the institutions. So, as hypothesized, political judgments, and especially enduring political predispositions, tilt Venezuelan respondents’ judgments regarding the nation’s core political institutions.

Polarization of trust is not limited to institutions of national government in post-Chávez Venezuela. A careful reading of the political actions and policy decisions of Chavismo during the last years makes clear that the chavistas understand that the progress of their political project hinges not only on
maintaining the power of state institutions, but in redefining old institutions and in creating new spaces of social and political organization. The evidence shows that trust toward the military and toward local popular forms of organization is also divided along ideological and partisan lines. In constructing the 21st Century Socialism, President Chávez first, and now President Maduro, have worked to create the legal, institutional, policy, and social bases of the Communal State. The Communal Councils are fundamental units of this social and political model, and the government has promoted the organization of ten of thousands of these councils across the nation. The current analysis has revealed that in 2014 the Communal Councils enjoy moderate level of trust among Venezuelan respondents. Despite the relatively short life span of these institutions, they have been able to generate a level of trust that rivals that of national institutions in 2014. However, I found that polarization of opinion also reaches the Communal Councils. This can be seen as both good and bad news for the strategy of building alternative institutions.

The data examined here were obtained in the first months of 2014, very early in the post-Chávez era. How the nation’s political institutions evolve in the months and years to come, and how citizens of the nation respond, remains to be seen. At present, two critical points are clear. First, following Hugo Chávez’s death, Venezuelans’ trust in core political institutions suffered a precipitous decline. Regardless of whether this drop was caused by Chávez’s removal from the scene, the point remains that levels of trust now are much lower than just two years ago. Second, although Hugo Chávez was a galvanizing force, his death apparently did not cause Venezuelans’ political attitudes to lose cohesiveness. To the contrary, at the individual level, Venezuelans’ judgments with respect to trust remain very tightly structured in 2014. At the aggregate level, those same judgments exhibit strong polarization. Venezuelans are highly divided with respect to the attributes and trustworthiness of their nation’s political system. Viewed optimistically, this situation signals that ground exists for a healthy, vibrant and productive discussion regarding the nation’s political future. Viewed pessimistically, however, this same situation possibly signals a nation at risk for further clashes and social unrest. Which view is accurate ultimately will hinge on how and how well Venezuela’s citizens and leaders navigate political change in the post-Chávez era.
Bibliography


Hambloch, Ernest. 1936. His Majesty, the President of Brazil. New York: Dutton.


### Appendix

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Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; rounds 2008, 2010
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*** p ≤ .001; ** p ≤ .01; * p ≤ .05; # p ≤ .10

Note: Coefficients are the result of OLS regression models. Analysis conducted in Stata using AmericasBarometer-Venezuela survey 2014.

Below, the original question labels and wording for variables used in the analysis. All variables were converted on a scale from 0 (denoting low value) to 1 (denoting high value).

**Trust in Institutions Questions**

En esta tarjeta hay una escalera con escalones numerados del uno al siete, en la cual 1 es el escalón más bajo y significa NADA y el 7 es el escalón más alto y significa MUCHO. Por ejemplo, si yo le preguntara hasta qué punto le gusta ver televisión, si a usted no le gusta ver nada, elegiría un puntaje de 1. Si por el contrario le gusta mucho ver televisión me diría el número 7. Si su opinión está entre nada y mucho elegiría un puntaje intermedio. Entonces, ¿hasta qué punto le gusta a usted ver televisión? Léame el número. [Asegúrese que el entrevistado entienda correctamente].

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**B10A.** ¿Hasta qué punto tiene confianza en el sistema de justicia?

**B12.** ¿Hasta qué punto tiene confianza usted en la Fuerza Armada Nacional?

**B13.** ¿Hasta qué punto tiene confianza usted en la Asamblea Nacional?

**B21A.** ¿Hasta qué punto tiene confianza usted en el presidente?

**VENB50.** ¿Hasta qué punto tiene usted confianza en los consejos comunales?

**Sex**

**Q1.** Género [ANOTAR, NO PREGUNTE]:

(1) Hombre       (2) Mujer

Recoded (0) Female (1) Male

**Size of place of residency**

**TAMANO. Tamaño del lugar:**

(1) Capital Nacional (área metropolitana)  (2) Ciudad grande  (3) Ciudad mediana  (4) Ciudad pequeña  (5) Área rural

The original scale was reversed.

**Age**

**Q2Y.** ¿En qué año nació? _______ año  (8888) N5  (9888) NR

Measured by the variable Q2 which ranges from 18 to 89, but has been recoded as (0) respondent is ≤ 34 years old (1) 34 years old or more.

46 | P a g e
**Education**

ED. ¿Cuál fue el último año de educación que usted completó o aprobó?

____ Año de ___________________ (primaria, secundaria (Básico), Secundaria (Diversificado) universitaria, superior no universitaria) = ______ años total [Usar tabla a continuación para el código]

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**Quintiles of Wealth**

Measured by the variable Quintall created by LAPOP. The original scale ranges from 1 to 5.

**Exposure to Political News**

G10. ¿Con qué frecuencia sigue las noticias, ya sea en la televisión, la radio, los periódicos o el Internet? [Leer opciones]

(1) Diariamente  (2) Algunas veces a la semana  (3) Algunas veces al mes
(4) Rara vez    (5) Nunca    (88) NS    (98) NR

The original scale was reversed.

**Evaluation of Corruption in Government**

EXC7. Teniendo en cuenta su experiencia o lo que ha oído mencionar, ¿la corrupción de los funcionarios públicos en el país está: [LEER]

(1) Muy generalizada  (2) Algo generalizada  (3) Poco generalizada
(4) Nada generalizada (88) NS    (98) NR

The original scale was reversed.

**Ideology**

L1. Cambiando de tema, en esta tarjeta tenemos una escala del 1 a 10 que va de izquierda a derecha, en la que el 1 significa izquierda y el 10 significa derecha. Hoy en día cuando se habla de tendencias políticas, mucha gente habla de aquellos que simpatizan más con la izquierda o con la derecha. Según el sentido que tengan para usted los términos “izquierda” y “derecha” cuando piensa sobre su punto
de vista político, ¿dónde se encontraría usted en esta escala? Dígame el número.

<table>
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<th>NS</th>
<th>N</th>
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**Izquierda** | **Derecha**

**Winner Status**

This variable is based on VB3n. The variable winner status is a dummy variable with (1) voted for Maduro and (0) otherwise.

**VB3n.** ¿Por quién votó para Presidente en las últimas elecciones presidenciales de 2013? [NO LEER LISTA]

- (00) Ninguno (fue a votar pero dejó la boleta en blanco) [Pasar VB101]
- (97) Ninguno (anuló su voto) [Pasar VB101]
- (1601) Nicolás Maduro (Gran Polo Patriótico) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1602) Henrique Capriles (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1603) Eusebio Méndez (NUVIPA) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1604) María Bolívar (PDUPL) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1605) Reina Sequera (Poder Laboral) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1606) Julio Mora (UDEMO) [Pasar a VB10]
- (1677) Otro [Pasar a VB10]
- (88) NS [Pasar a VB10]
- (98) NR [Pasar a VB10]
- (99) INAP (No votó) [Pasar a VB4NEW]

**External Efficacy**

Ahora, vamos a usar una escalera similar, pero el número 1 representa “muy en desacuerdo” y el número 7 representa “muy de acuerdo”. Un número entre el 1 y el 7, representa un puntaje intermedio.

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<th>88</th>
<th>98</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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**EFF1.** A los que gobiernan el país les interesa lo que piensa la gente como usted. ¿Hasta qué punto está de acuerdo o en desacuerdo con esta frase?
### Perception of political division

<table>
<thead>
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<th>1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NADA</strong></td>
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<td><strong>MUCHO</strong></td>
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<td><strong>88 = NS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>98 = NR</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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**POLZ1.** Hoy en día se habla mucho de que los venezolanos están divididos. En su opinión, ¿cuánta división política hay hoy entre los venezolanos? Digame un número de la escala donde 1 es que no hay nada de división política entre los venezolanos, y 7 que hay mucha división política.

### Perception of political division compared with 12 month ago

**POLZ1a.** ¿Y usted diría que la división política entre los venezolanos hoy en día es mucho mayor, mayor, igual, menor o mucho menor que hace 12 meses?

- (1) Mucho mayor
- (2) Mayor
- (3) Igual
- (4) Menor
- (5) Mucho menor
- (88) **NS** (98) **NR**

The original scale was reversed.