

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Struggle to Legitimate Political Regimes in Venezuela: From Pérez Jiménez to Maduro

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This essay reviews the following works:

Chávez's Legacy: The Transformation from Democracy to a Mafia State. By Ari Chaplin. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2014. Pp. vii + 230. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780761862659.

Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez, 2nd ed. By Javier Corrales and Mark Penfold. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 237. \$27.00 paper. ISBN: 9780815725930.

Poder, petróleo y pobreza. By José Antonio Gil Yepes. Caracas: Libros Marcadores, 2015. Pp. 367. Paper. ISBN: 9789804080395.

Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know. By Miguel Tinker Salas. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 241. \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199783281.

We Are the State! Barrio Activism in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. By Cristobal Valencia. Tucson: University of the Arizona Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 229. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780816531561.

Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela. By Alejandro Velasco. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 344. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520283329.

President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela struggled throughout 2016 to recapture the support enjoyed by his predecessor, Hugo Chávez Frías. Chávez's political regime,¹ popularly known as Twenty-First-Century Socialism, retained the backing of most Venezuelans while its founder lived. After his death in March 2013, support for the regime declined. Dissatisfaction with Maduro's rule resulted in defeat for the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) in the National Assembly elections of December 2015. In the following year Maduro made significant changes in the rules of the political game that most Venezuelans had accepted since Chávez's reelection as president in 2006.

The six volumes reviewed here illuminate Venezuelan political development over seven decades, beginning in 1946. Each probes the institutions, attitudes and behavior that define the search for political legitimacy in Venezuela.² One, the brief history of Venezuela by Miguel Tinker Salas, begins with the arrival of Spaniards

¹ For a detailed discussion of "regime" as used in this review see Alan Siaroff, "Regime (Comparative Politics)," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, ed. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonardo Morlino, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412959636.n511>.

² Leon Hurd, "Legitimacy," in *Encyclopedia Princetoniensis*, <https://pesd.princeton.edu/?q=node/255>. "Legitimacy is commonly defined in political science and sociology as the belief that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern. It is a judgment by an individual about the rightfulness of a hierarchy between rule or ruler and its subject and about the subordinate's obligations toward the rule or ruler. When shared by many individuals, legitimacy produces distinctive collective effects in society, including making collective social order more efficient, more consensual, and perhaps more just . . . if authorities are not viewed as legitimate, social regulation is more difficult and costly."

in the sixteenth century. Especially relevant for this review is his discussion of how the discovery and exploitation of petroleum between 1922 and World War II integrated the regions of Venezuela and forged that country's national identity. Tinker Salas also brings to life the political, economic, and social foundations of the three political regimes that organized Venezuelan political life between 1948 and 2015. The first, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship, appeared in 1948. Alejandro Velasco's *Barrio Rising* focuses on the iconic Caracas public housing project "2 de diciembre." This was the crown jewel in Pérez Jiménez's effort to legitimate his rule by modernizing the urban infrastructure of Caracas. This policy carried over into the successor political regime, known as Punto Fijo.³ In *We Are the State!* Cristobal Valencia picks up where Velasco leaves off. He explains how Caracas shantytown residents, many residing in housing projects built by Punto Fijo governments, responded to Hugo Chávez's promise to redistribute wealth, status, and power.

The other three volumes compare the political regime that ruled between 1958 and 1998 with the one that emerged in 1999. Social scientists describe the former, Punto Fijo, as a limited pluralistic democracy. They label the latter, Chávez's Twenty-First-Century Socialism, as a delegative democracy or a hybrid democratic-authoritarianism.⁴ *Chávez's Legacy*, by Ari Chaplin, views Punto Fijo as a true democracy and laments its transformation to a mafia state. The second edition of Javier Corrales and Mark Penfold's *Dragon in the Tropics* retains the first edition's cogent analysis of the rise of Hugo Chávez and adds two new chapters. One examines Chávez's declining influence. The second discusses the consequences of President Maduro's turn toward authoritarianism. *Poder, petróleo y pobreza* is a magisterial work by José Antonio Gil Yepes, one of Venezuela's leading political sociologists and the founder of DATANALISIS, an influential polling company. This study compares the concentration of political power in Punto Fijo and Twenty-First-Century Socialism and identifies the attitudes that underpin these political regimes.

What follows examines each of the regimes that organized political behavior in Venezuela after the short-lived revolutionary government of Rómulo Gallegos (1948): Pérez Jiménez's authoritarian dictatorship (1948–1958); limited pluralism (1958–1998) controlled by two political parties (Acción Democrática, AD; and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, COPEI); and direct democracy, or hybrid authoritarian-democracy (1999–2013), dominated by Hugo Chávez Frías. This review examines three phases in the life cycle of each regime: transition and its outcome, consolidation, and decay. The review emphasizes the contribution of the six studies to understanding the evolution of each political regime. Together the books reveal that Venezuelans have yet to craft a political regime that commands broad support for more than the boom of an oil cycle.

Pérez Jiménez's Authoritarian Regime: The New National Ideal

The 1948 coup against President Rómulo Gallegos set in motion a political transition that ended five years later when the Constituent Assembly controlled by General Pérez Jiménez elected him to a five-year term (1953–1958) as president. Tinker Salas cuts through the confusion that surrounded the coup and the political maneuvering that followed. He describes events leading up to the assassination of Provisional President Carlos Delgado (1950), the stolen election of 1952, and Pérez Jiménez's assumption of power. Velasco's study of the 2 de diciembre housing project begins by noting that during the brief revolutionary period known as the Trienio (1945–1948), AD governments ignored cityward migration. That neglect explains in large part why shantytown residents made no effort to defend the Gallegos government. It also explains the ease with which Pérez Jiménez disavowed the 1952 presidential election results and consolidated his control. Crafting and legitimating a new set of political rules was the greatest challenge facing the new chief executive in 1952.

Venezuela's income from the sale of petroleum gave Pérez Jiménez ample financial resources to build support for his political regime. He courted the urban migrants, especially in Caracas, that previous governments ignored. The reward for their support was to be an urban built environment that mimicked European and North American cities. Velasco discusses the New National Ideal's plans to transform the built environment of Caracas. Velasco examines the architectural plans for 2 de diciembre, describes the people who acquired apartments in the project and explains government calculations of how the project

³ The name Punto Fijo derives from the residence in Caracas where the leaders (Rómulo Betancourt, Rafael Caldera, and Jóvito Villalba) of Venezuela's three most important political parties signed the agreement in which they promised that their parties would share power regardless of the outcome of the 1958 elections for president and Congress.

⁴ On delegative democracy, see Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 55–69. On hybrid democratic-authoritarianism, see Alina Rocha Menocal, Verena Fritz, and Lise Rakner, "Hybrid Regimes and the Challenges of Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Developing Countries," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2008): 29–40.

would enhance support for the political regime. He also analyzes the consequences of failure to account for the preferences and living conditions of those for whom the project was built. Social scientists will be especially interested in Velasco's discussion of how the politics of building 2 de diciembre created distortions and inefficiencies that angered residents of the surrounding shantytowns, who dreamed of acquiring an apartment but whose dreams remained unfulfilled.

The New National Ideal lacked legitimacy from its inception. Pérez Jiménez never overcame the widely shared belief that he stole the 1952 election. What support the New National Ideal enjoyed rested on promises to improve living standards and maintain social peace. In the dictator's thinking, a modern urban infrastructure would symbolize progress and unite the urban poor and middle classes in support of his rule. Velasco and Tinker Salas discuss how poor planning and corruption in allocating apartments led residents of 2 de diciembre to turn against the government. They came to view the builders and managers of 2 de diciembre as out of touch with their needs and preferences. Shantytown residents in other cities shared these assessments. Support for the New National Ideal eroded. In November 1957 Pérez Jiménez organized a referendum that he believed would strengthen the legitimacy of his rule. It asked voters if the general should continue in office for five more years. The outcome, an announcement that 87 percent favored a new presidential term for Pérez Jiménez, had the opposite effect. It revived memories of earlier electoral fraud. Within months, an uprising centered in Caracas toppled the general.

Punto Fijo: Four Decades of Limited Pluralism

Transition from the New National Ideal to the Punto Fijo regime lasted six years, beginning with the flight of Pérez Jiménez on January 23, 1958. It ended on March 13, 1964, when President Rómulo Betancourt passed the presidential sash to his popularly elected successor, Raul Leoni. As the transition unfolded, the Democratic Republican Union political party (Unión República Democrática, URD) and the Communists built support in the shantytowns of Caracas and the interior. The AD political party rebuilt its networks of support in rural areas and among the urban middle classes of central and western Venezuela. COPEI did the same in the Andes and Caracas. Tinker Salas deals fleetingly with the efforts of AD and COPEI. He provides a useful overview of how radicals who broke with those parties joined the Communists in an insurgency that lasted for almost a decade. Insurgents rejected limited pluralism and sought to impose rules of the political game modeled on communist Cuba. Velasco's work breaks new ground with its examination of relations between the political parties, the Venezuelan state, the insurgency, and residents of 2 de diciembre.

Barrio Rising describes the social landscape of 2 de diciembre (renamed 23 de enero) during the transition to Punto Fijo. Chaos prevailed. Neither the provisional government nor the elected government of Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964) ever gained control over 23 de enero. The schools, shops, and recreational facilities complementing the housing projects remained unfinished. Migrants who failed to obtain apartments in the project took matters into their own hands. They constructed *ranchos* (makeshift dwellings) like those that Pérez Jiménez destroyed to make room for high-rise apartments. Communist and leftist insurgents, many drawn from the ranks of disaffected neighborhood residents, engaged in periodic gunfights with the national government's security forces. Velasco suggests that initially most residents of the project did not support the insurgents. They desired security and stability. However, intrusions by the police and military were heavy handed. Sympathy for the insurgents increased. They blocked the national government from asserting its authority over 23 de enero for almost a decade after the insurgency was reduced to a minor annoyance elsewhere. Even when the government gained control, residents of 23 de enero mistrusted AD and COPEI. However, they did accept Punto Fijo rules of the political game.

Feelings about the Punto Fijo regime and its ruling class varied between 1963 and 1988. In general, these were times when most Venezuelans approved of the political game rules crafted by AD and COPEI. A petroleum boom provided the central governments with extraordinary income. Extravagant budgets enabled AD and COPEI presidents to improve public services, invest in education, add to the physical infrastructure, develop industry, and upgrade agriculture. It is to these accomplishments that Ari Chaplin points when he compares the performance of Punto Fijo favorably to resource allocation directed by Hugo Chávez (xx). Velasco portrays life during Punto Fijo consolidation as a time when residents of 23 de enero enjoyed benefits made possible by economic prosperity. Government collected the garbage, built new schools, and constructed transportation infrastructure that eased travel to the workplace. Nevertheless, urban marginals remained distrustful of AD and COPEI. Neither political party had meaningful success in organizing them. Tinker Salas's overview of public policy during Punto Fijo consolidation confirms that the national government lacked an integrated strategy to address the conditions of urban poverty and marginalization.

Jose Antonio Gil delivers a pathbreaking comparison of Punto Fijo and Twenty-First-Century Socialism's rules of the political game (11–81). The Pact of Punto Fijo, from which the regime took its name, was an agreement to share power between the three most important political parties (AD, COPEI, and URD) in the resistance to General Pérez Jiménez. Signers of the pact excluded the Communist Party (PCV). During the presidency of Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964), first the Communists and then leftist splinters from AD and URD decided that Punto Fijo had betrayed the resistance movement against Pérez Jiménez. Their leaders never wavered in this belief, but after 1964 they gave up on insurgency. Subsequently, the alienated left challenged Punto Fijo by using its own rules to undermine the regime. Until the urban riots of 1989 this strategy had little success.

Gil, Tinker Salas, and Chaplin agree that at its zenith Punto Fijo developed a widely accepted power-sharing arrangement. AD and COPEI, along with the military high command, were the primary beneficiaries. Also, Venezuelan businessmen successfully lobbied public-sector executives, and both developed extensive ties with multinational corporations. The multinationals provided technical expertise for infrastructure projects, such as the Caracas metro, construction of hydroelectric plants, and industrial expansion in steel and aluminum. National entrepreneurs and their international allies supported Punto Fijo.⁵

AD and COPEI used income from the Petrobonanza (1973–1983) to develop and maintain client networks. Their most important clients were unionized workers, agricultural laborers, and professionals employed in public and private corporations. Gil's analysis of how political culture shaped these networks merits careful reading. The central government controlled regional and local governments. National party organizations selected candidates for office in the regions and municipalities. All six of the volumes present evidence that as Punto Fijo consolidation progressed, political party elites became more powerful. At the opposite extreme were the urban poor. Velasco's describes how the demands made by residents of 23 de enero were treated by politicians. He reveals that even in prosperous times they treated the urban poor as an afterthought. Still, as Gil demonstrates (143), Punto Fijo enabled millions of Venezuelans to experience upward mobility.

Most observers trace the decay of Punto Fijo to the rioting known as the Caracazo that rocked Caracas on February 27–March 1, 1989.⁶ The chaos spread to cities of the interior. Increases in the cost of gasoline and public transportation led to anarchy. Looting spilled from the shantytowns into middle-class neighborhoods. A few days earlier President Carlos Andrés Pérez had cautioned that belt tightening would be required. But the measures government would apply were never communicated clearly. Pérez had been in office less than a month. He won the December 1988 presidential election by insinuating that he would restore the prosperity of the petroleum boom era. When reality contradicted expectations, discontent with Punto Fijo flared, especially among the urban poor. Velasco ends *Barrio Rising* with a poignant account of how the Caracazo played out in 23 de enero. Most residing in the area retreated into their apartments after project militants retrieved hidden weapons and took control of the neighborhood. Residents recoiled in stunned disbelief as ill-trained police and militia fired round after round into apartment buildings while reasserting central government control. The number of fatalities remains unknown, but loss of life estimates for the major cities range from forty-four (official statistics) to more than two thousand. Velasco ends his work with a graphic account of the carnage entitled “Killing Democracy's Promise: A Massacre of People and Expectations” (194–236).

Political decay deepened during the 1990s. Two unsuccessful coups, plummeting petroleum prices, and the privatization of state enterprises undermined Punto Fijo legitimacy. The coups called into question civilian control over the military. They sharpened the division inside AD between supporters and opponents of President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Initial support from COPEI for Pérez gave way to criticism as the president's popularity declined. In May 1993, Congress removed Pérez from office (Tinker Salas, 133–137). In 1994 the banking system crashed. This destroyed many financial institutions and businesses that backed Punto Fijo. The crash also soured multinationals on their plans to make Caracas the gateway for investors interested in South America.

⁵ Petroleum income enabled Punto Fijo governments to modernize Venezuela's physical infrastructure. Infrastructure investment declined sharply after 1983. Ricardo Hausmann and Francisco R. Rodríguez, eds., *Venezuela before Chávez: Anatomy of an Economic Collapse* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), found that the decline in physical infrastructure investment played a major role in weakening Venezuela's economy. Economic deterioration played a major role in the demise of Punto Fijo.

⁶ The authors of the works being reviewed, with the possible exception of Chaplin, share this assessment. See also David J. Myers, “Perceptions of a Stressed Democracy: Inevitable Decay or Foundation for Rebirth,” in *Venezuelan Democracy under Stress*, ed. Jennifer McCoy, Andrés Serbin, William C. Smith, and Andrés Stambouli (New Brunswick, N. J. Transaction Publications, 1995), 107–113.

Political instability and declining oil prices promoted economic contraction. Unemployment rose and the informal economy expanded. State and local governments received smaller budgetary allocations from the central government. Decisions to privatize state enterprises reduced the ability of AD and COPEI to sustain the network of clients on whose support they depended. Public sector employees and military officers experienced decline in their standard of living. Both groups chafed as the gap between their income and the income of private sector executives widened. Gil's multivariate models (306–320) explain how the aura of government corruption exacerbated the negative impact of political instability and economic decline in the 1990s.

Punto Fijo presidents struggled to salvage the regime. After the Caracazo, Carlos Andrés Pérez convinced Congress to pass legislation that reorganized the Venezuelan state. This legislation strengthened the economic capabilities and political autonomy of regional and local governments. It also reduced the ability of national party leaders to select candidates for regional governors, regional legislatures, mayors and municipal councils. Pérez, as indicated earlier, also privatized many state enterprises. These institutions had been engines of development and sources of employment. But they seldom showed a profit. Government covered their losses with revenue from the sale of petroleum. The studies discussed here agree that reductions in petroleum income made it impossible for the state to make up for losses by public sector corporations. Privatization, however, was controversial. Gil presents data that shows that the prevailing political culture viewed privatization and other components of Pérez's neoliberal agenda as betrayal—a sellout to oligarchic and imperialistic interests (45–60).

Rafael Caldera, the founder of COPEI, echoed this criticism. In 1993, when younger party leaders denied Caldera COPEI's presidential nomination, he exited the party. Caldera established a personalist movement, National Convergence (Convergencia Nacional). He ran in the presidential election of 1993 with support from the center-left Movement toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS). Promises to abandon neoliberalism and end corruption propelled him to victory. Tinker Salas (126–128) analyzes how two years into his presidency, deteriorating economic conditions forced Caldera to adopt the neoliberal agenda of his predecessor. In Congress, the AD backed Caldera's return to policies that voters rejected when they elected him.

The confluence of factional strife in the governing political parties, economic recession, and perceptions that ruling elites were corrupt and unresponsive destroyed the legitimacy of Punto Fijo. Gil's analysis of public opinion data from the 1990s confirms the deterioration of support for Punto Fijo. Gil finds that 90 percent of respondents to DATANALISIS polling wanted Venezuela to remain democratic, but most desired a different kind of democracy (244–248). Before the new century dawned, Punto Fijo would be no more.

Twenty-First-Century Socialism: A Different Democracy

Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frías appeared on the political scene in 1992 as the architect of an unsuccessful military coup. Attempting a coup defied the defining rule of Punto Fijo that power will be passed only through free and fair elections. Chávez justified his actions by claiming that Punto Fijo elections were neither free nor fair. They were rigged to perpetuate rule by corrupt politicians and oligarchs. After defeating the coup, President Carlos Andrés Pérez jailed Chávez and his fellow plotters. Two years later, newly elected President Rafael Caldera pardoned them and restored their political rights. Chávez then organized the Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento V [Quinta] República, MVR) that carried him to victory in the 1998 presidential election. At his February 1999 inauguration, he promised to destroy the corrupt system whose rules he had used to gain power. Before the year ended, voters approved a new constitution that replaced the one in force during the Punto Fijo era. This set in motion a period of regime transition that lasted for seven years.

In the second edition of their volume examining Chávez as a transformative political leader, Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold repeat the first edition's account of how Chávez outmaneuvered Punto Fijo elites. This work is at its best when explaining how Punto Fijo institutions viewed as illegitimate crumbled under attacks from Chávez and his followers. Chávez remained at the pinnacle of power during the transition to Twenty-First-Century Socialism despite a failed coup (April 2002), an unsuccessful recall election (August 2004), and voters' rejection of the rules that would govern political behavior in the regime he wanted to impose (December 2007). Reviewers have described the first edition of *Dragon in the Tropics* as methodologically sophisticated, cogently argued, and ideologically balanced. The passage of time bears out this assessment. It should be noted that chapter 6 in both editions has influenced an important body of work that compares and contrasts “hybrid and populist” political regimes.

Anthropologist Cristobal Valencia examines social structure and political behavior in the shantytowns and high-rise public housing projects of El Valle and other neighborhoods of southern Caracas. The population

of this zone is not unlike that of 23 de enero: some working-class residents having stable employment, and numerous individuals subsisting through the informal economy. Valencia resided for long periods in El Valle, beginning in 2003 when the transition to Twenty-First-Century Socialism was in full swing. He opts for an ethnographic approach. He is interested in popular participation, viewing it as a confrontation shaped by culture and the structure of political power (7). In many respects, Valencia's research is parallel to Velasco's in *Barrio Rising*. Both profile social interaction and the making of political demands while newly established governments are attempting to impose a political regime. However, in the case of 23 de enero, regime elites viewed project occupants as a threat to their project. Hugo Chávez, however, owed his election as president to the votes of the kinds of people who populated El Valle. The success of his project depended on retaining their support. Both Velasco and Valencia have crafted sophisticated analyses of efforts by the urban poor to find their place in an emerging political regime.

Valencia brings to life the worldview of his neighbors in El Valle. In 2003 they were emerging from two decades during which Punto Fijo governments largely abandoned the shantytowns. Residents of El Valle took heart when President Chávez appealed to them as *El Soberano* (the sovereign ones). They responded by proclaiming, "We are the state." Valencia's experience living with rancho residents—from workers to single mothers to community leaders—convinced him that the urban poor were actively challenging the dominant way of doing politics. They exhibited a "non-traditional understanding of the meaning of politics" (93–95). Rather than viewing themselves as clients of the power elite, they plotted to take control of the state. In so doing they felt that were strengthening Chávez's revolution. *El Soberano* would replace the oligarchs and petit bourgeoisie who controlled Punto Fijo.

We Are the State also examines the role of race in empowering the urban poor. El Valle's inhabitants resented light-skinned purveyors of political power. They viewed politicians and bureaucrats as having benefited unfairly from social advantages and privileged access to education. In the thinking of El Valle residents, those in authority had discriminated against the darker-skinned peasants and their descendants who populated the shantytowns. Valencia found that rancho residents in south Caracas believed that AD and COPEI had betrayed their revolutionary heritage. Instead of empowering people of color, they adopted the ways of light-skinned oligarchs. The people of El Valle considered meritocracy as a ruse perpetrated by oligarchs to discriminate against the poor. Chávez played to this perception in his strategizing for the 2006 presidential election. He distributed goods to the urban poor using newly created "Missions" rather than the existing bureaucracies (Tinker Salas, 195–196). He staffed the Missions with supporters, many of them from the shantytowns.

Ari Chaplin's volume is dedicated to making the case that Chávez destroyed democracy and transformed Venezuela into a communist narco-state. He sees Chávez as strongly influenced by Antonio Gramsci and Fidel Castro. Chaplin grew up in post-Ceaușescu Romania. Ceaușescu had confiscated his family's possessions. Chaplin opens his work by asserting that "economic development and the reduction of poverty can only occur by employment in the free market" (xviii). Much of this volume compares developments in Venezuela with events in other countries that have implemented radical leftist agendas.

Chaplin provides a useful discussion of civil-military relations during the transition to Twenty-First-Century Socialism (37–43). He expounds on the prevailing view that Venezuela's military was professional and competent in 1999, when Caldera turned over the presidency to Chávez. Initially, the new president tasked the armed forces with managing the physical infrastructure. However, after the unsuccessful coup of April 2002, Chávez's attitude toward the armed forces changed. He promoted only officers whose loyalty to the regime was unquestioned. Within two years those who argued for professionalism over revolutionary commitment were no longer in uniform. This former group included all officers with close ties to the United States military. In 2005 the National Assembly passed the Organic Law of the Armed Forces Services. Modeled on Cuban law, this legislation cemented Chávez's control over Venezuela's military.

Over the next two years transition led to regime consolidation, more or less. The opposition abandoned efforts to overthrow the government by force, participated in the December 2006 presidential election and accepted Chávez's resounding victory. A year later President Chávez asked voters to ratify sixty-nine constitutional amendments that would consolidate the transition to a socialist state.⁷ The most controversial of these abolished presidential term limits and allowed for the indefinite reelection of the president. Almost as contentious was reorganization of the country's administrative structure. Chavez proposed emasculating the elected regional governors and mayors. Effective power would be lodged in an unelected "popular power"

⁷ A useful overview of the proposed changes appears in Gregory Wilpert, "Making Sense of Venezuela's Constitutional Reform," *VenAnalysis.com*, December 1, 2007, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2943>.

dependent on the national executive. Other important changes would have ended the autonomy of the central bank, prohibited large land estates, and increased the presidential term from six to seven years. Voters narrowly rejected these changes. Regardless, Chávez imposed them piecemeal over the next three years. But his energy flagged following his diagnosis with cancer in June 2011 (Corrales and Penfold, 158–203). The ailing president was reelected in October 2012. He passed away before he could be inaugurated. Following his death, Twenty-First-Century Socialism no longer functioned as a consolidated political regime.

Five of our studies examine defining features of Twenty-First-Century Socialism between 2007 and 2013. Tinker Salas delivers a balanced account of the issues and behavior that differentiated Chávez partisans from other Venezuelans. Of special interest is his analysis of how the social basis of Chavista support gave the president the upper hand in dealing with his opponents. Corrales and Penfold explain how steep increases in income from the sale of petroleum oiled the regime machinery that fueled the consolidated regime. They also chronicle how Chávez reoriented Venezuelan foreign policy away from collaboration with Washington to one that strategized with leftist governments to reduce United States influence in South American and the Caribbean.

Chaplin comments on features of Twenty-First-Century Socialism that other works in this review also discuss, yet he brings a strikingly different perspective. Using a variety of secondary sources, Chaplin contrasts the “true” democracy that Venezuela lost (Punto Fijo) with what he characterizes as a mafia state presided over by Hugo Chávez. Forty percent of Chaplin’s work focuses on economic disasters and human rights abuses in other countries with authoritarian political regimes. He empathizes with the opponents of Twenty-First-Century Socialism, painting them as victims of thuggery. In his view they suffer the same oppression as government opponents in Cuba, China, and Iran. Chaplin finds Twenty-First-Century Socialism to be without redeeming qualities.

Valencia describes social and political life in El Valle from his experience as a resident of the shantytowns. He finds the inhabitants of South Caracas determined to exercise their newfound power and influence. These people have no interest in rules of the political game that legitimate checks and balances, as in Lockean democracy. The checks and balances they knew were embedded in Punto Fijo, where they empowered the oligarchy. People in El Valle emerge as Rousseauian in that they view Chávez as the embodiment of the general will, which they call “Popular Power” (Valencia, 104–106). They believe that traditional institutions of local government should be subject to popular power exercised by communal institutions. Thus, El Soberano can demand the removal of elected government officials who do not support the socialist revolution. This line of reasoning led most in El Valle to back President Chávez in 2009, when he orchestrated the stripping of power from Antonio Ledesma, the elected “High Mayor” of metropolitan Caracas. At Chávez’s request the government-controlled National Assembly passed legislation that transferred Ledesma’s authority and budget to a presidentially appointed governor. Ledesma had been a leader of AD and married into a wealthy Caracas family. Valencia finds an element of payback for the sins of Punto Fijo in rancho support for the treatment of Ledesma.

José Antonio Gil codifies and compares the rules of Punto Fijo and Twenty-First-Century Socialism (17–20), finding a surprising number of similarities between the two sets of rules.⁸ Gil’s public opinion data disclosed that from the beginning most Venezuelans accepted the Chávez government as legitimate. Polling also found that on the eve of the October 2012 presidential election, after fourteen years in power, 60 percent held a positive view of Chávez. Fifty percent were positive toward his government (256–257). For them, Chávez continued to encapsulate the power of El Soberano. In that election, the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles, acted as if he believed that the regime’s rules would allow for the peaceful transfer of power if he won the election. Capriles lost by almost 10 percentage points. He accepted defeat. But he also charged that during the election campaign obstinately neutral state institutions had assisted Chávez in ways that violated the 1999 constitution.

After Chávez died, support for Twenty-First-Century Socialism declined. In the presidential elections of April 14, 2013, Nicolas Maduro received 50.7 percent of the total vote, defeating opposition candidate Henrique Capriles by less than 2 percent. The opposition charged fraud. Most governments in Latin America and elsewhere accepted the official count. Their backing, along with support from the military, smoothed the way for Maduro’s inauguration on April 19, 2013. Capriles and the opposition never accepted Maduro’s government as legitimate. Incomplete regime consolidation gave way to political decay.

⁸ Chapter 4, “Efectos de la concentración del poder en la cultura política venezolano,” draws on polling data to document a surprising number of similarities between political attitudes and political orientations in Punto Fijo and Twenty-First-Century Socialism.

Conclusion

Each work reviewed here breaks new ground. Tinker Salas discusses and analyzes pivotal events shaping post–World War II Venezuela. He links them to developments and attitudes that date from the arrival of Europeans in the New World. Velasco and Valencia illuminate the evolutionary thread that begins with peasants' cityward migration in the 1940s. They trace migrants' transformation into residents of housing projects and shantytowns in Caracas. From these locations the new arrivals influenced change in three political regimes: the New National Ideal, Punto Fijo, and Twenty-First-Century Socialism. Chaplin gives us a dark interpretation of political change. He depicts transformation from Punto Fijo to Twenty-First-Century Socialism as the triumph of mafia thuggery. Corrales and Penfield add to their earlier portrait of Hugo Chávez as a political leader. New material provides insights into political decline and flirtations with authoritarianism. Gil assembles and interprets a trove of information. He breaks new ground in his use of quantitative data to compare Punto Fijo and Twenty-First-Century Socialism.

These studies are not without their limitations. Tinker Salas is overly optimistic in assessing the prospects for democracy in a Chavista regime without Chávez. Valencia, and to a lesser extent Velasco, are so focused on the political demands made by residents of 23 de enero and El Valle that they ignore cross-cutting pressures on governments as they struggle to balance demands by the urban poor with those from other groups. Chaplin's chosen task of discrediting Twenty-First-Century Socialism distorts his analysis of why Chávez succeeded in dismantling Punto Fijo. Gil's probe of power, petroleum, and poverty would have benefited from exploring how the charismatic authority attached to Carlos Andrés Pérez and Hugo Chávez allowed them to modify attitudes about the legitimate uses of political power.

Most of the research examined here was completed in early 2014. It has little to say about the unraveling of support for Twenty-First-Century Socialism that occurred under President Nicolás Maduro. In December 2015, the MUD (Mesa de Unidad Democrática, Democratic Unity Table)⁹ contested and won elections for the National Assembly. The government allowed the opposition-controlled assembly to convene. However, soon after it met the Chavista-dominated Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Justice handed down decisions that undercut the National Assembly's powers. By September 2016 the National Assembly was little more than a forum from which opponents of Twenty-First-Century Socialism could criticize the government. President Maduro also proclaimed that soon communal institutions controlled by the national executive would legislate for the nation and replace elected subnational governments. This subverting of Twenty-First-Century Socialism's political rules increased opposition to the government and damaged the PSUV.¹⁰ The delegative democracy whose consolidation Chávez sought to conserve with his victory in the 2012 presidential election was unraveling.

As 2016 drew to a close political decay accelerated. The economy was on life support. Income from petroleum remained depressed and the physical infrastructure suffered from neglect. Drug trafficking and corruption permeated political life. Demonstrations against and supportive of the government increased. Opponents claimed that Twenty-First-Century Socialism had become a dictatorship. Supporters portrayed opponents as oligarchs backed by international capitalism and intent on suppressing revolutionary democracy. In October 2016, both sides agreed to talks mediated by the Vatican. As of this writing (February 2017) these talks, after a contentious beginning, have ground to a halt.

In the final chapter of *Poder, petróleo and pobreza*, Jose Antonio Gil draws on information collected by DATANALISIS to argue that all Venezuelans share important values, and that these values can serve as the basis for a broadly acceptable political regime. He sees these values reflected in democratic pluralism, communalism, and capitalism. However, recent events suggest that differences between followers of Hugo Chávez and their opponents make finding mutually acceptable rules of the political game difficult if not impossible.

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⁹ The MUD was an electoral coalition of opposition political parties ranging from the center right to far left.

¹⁰ Polling by DATANALISIS in May 2016 found that only 23 percent of a national sample of Venezuelans approved of how President Maduro was running the country. Among the institutions of Twenty-First-Century Socialism only the opposition-controlled National Assembly was viewed positively.

of political party systems, public opinion, and urban policy making. He is the author or editor of more than fifty articles and eight books. His most recent publications include “Liberal Democracy, Populism, and Beyond: Elite Circulation in Bolivarian Venezuela” (*Latin American Research Review*, 2014) and “Venezuela: Politics, Urban Reform and the Challenges of Metropolitan Governance amid the Struggle for Democracy” (in *Metropolitan Governance in the Federalist Americas: Strategies for Equitable Integrated and Development*, edited by Peter K. Spink, Peter M. Ward, and Robert H. Wilson, 2012). Professor Myers has held faculty positions at the United States Military Academy (West Point), the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración (Caracas, Venezuela), UNINORTE (Barranquilla, Colombia), and the Central University of Venezuela. In 1978 he served as a Special Assistant for Latin American Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. In addition, Professor Myers has consulted with agencies of the United States government, the private sector and political parties throughout Latin America. He also served as an international election observer in Latin America with the Carter Center and the International Republican Institute.

How to cite this article: Myers, D J. The Struggle to Legitimate Political Regimes in Venezuela: From Pérez Jiménez to Maduro. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(4), pp. 711-719. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.240>

Submitted: 01 November 2016

Accepted: 15 November 2016

Published: 23 October 2017

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